



# **Information disclosure, privacy behaviours, and attitudes regarding employer surveillance of social networking sites:**

## **A study within Aberystwyth University**

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## Summary

The purpose of this research is to explore current use of social networking sites (SNSs) amongst the student population of Aberystwyth University, with particular respect to information-sharing and privacy behaviours, and to assess the potential impact of SNSs checks by employers on future use of these sites. The literature review noted the popularity of SNSs amongst university students, particularly for social interactions; yet, also noted were numerous privacy concerns faced by SNS users, and the prevalence of employer surveillance of SNS sites, something which may have significant effects on how these sites are used in the future.

A mixed-methods research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed to investigate the research question. An online questionnaire was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from Aberystwyth University students (undergraduate and postgraduate), after which a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine postgraduate students to gain a more comprehensive insight into the topic under investigation.

Results demonstrated that social use of SNSs is highly predominant, with participants desiring to use it for this purpose in the future. Participants were concerned with maintaining privacy online, and were careful with regards to posting and protecting information on SNSs; however, protective measures were imperfect due to human and system errors. Most respondents were aware of SNS surveillance, with many noting that this would have an impact on their future use. Reactions to this practise were mixed; while many questioned the usefulness of such information, others were satisfied to have their profiles checked as long as they had control over what employers could see. Certain practises were considered overly invasive, and garnered negative reactions. Continuation of such practises would possible have a negative impact on how these sites are used, unless users are provided with some means of protecting their online profiles.



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## List of abbreviations

EEO	Equal Employment Opportunities
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
IP[No.]	Interview Participant [no.]
LISA	Library & Information Science Abstracts
LISTA	Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts
QP[No.]	Questionnaire Participant [no.]
SNS	Social Networking Site: Also known as social networking websites (SNW) and social websites; refers to websites that allow for the creation of personal profiles and lists of online connections within a bounded system.
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the research

In recent years, the web has become increasingly social, with web users actively creating their own content for dissemination across the internet. Social networking sites (SNSs) are one such means of sharing user-generated content, allowing users to spread their content far beyond the borders of what was previously possible, and enabling them to “become the stars of their own productions” (Pempek et al, 2009, p.234).

However, SNSs have come under scrutiny regarding the safety of online information. Changes to SNS infrastructure or security features have often been met with negative reactions from users concerned about losing control over personal information. However, it is not only the sites themselves, but also the behaviour of the users that has gathered attention, with media reports indicating that people are spreading information without thought of the possible consequences. Examples of this include the arrest last summer of a teenager in Weymouth “on suspicion of malicious communications” (“Tom Daley Twitter abuse”, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012, no page), as a result of a series of abusive Tweets sent to Olympic swimmer Tom Daley, as well as the resignation of Hertfordshire’s deputy police commissioner in February 2013, following a storm of controversy over a post on her Twitter profile (“Hertfordshire deputy PCC resigns”, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

In using SNSs, people are growing more accustomed to, and are encouraged to share personal information with larger audiences. Research (e.g. Bateman, Pike and Butler, 2011) has suggested that internet users are comfortable sharing information within controlled environments, which is what makes SNSs (with password protection and privacy settings) attractive for information disclosure. Many SNS users communicate in a manner that demonstrates their belief that these online communities are safe (Clemmitt, 2006). They post information with a specific audience in mind, and, with the availability of privacy settings, are able to define the parameters of their audience. However, online privacy is at risk when users underestimate the visibility of their profiles and fail to enforce adequate privacy measures, thereby leaving information open to unwanted viewers.

Employers are also beginning to take note of the wealth of information on SNSs, using them to gather information about current/prospective employees. While employers have always had ways of conducting background checks on applicants, they were restricted due to cost, time and legal constraints. However, using SNSs, they are now able to conduct background checks at any stage of the hiring process, and are making decisions based on this information (Clark and Roberts, 2010).

SNS users are now becoming more aware of the possible privacy concerns they face due to the frequent media reports on the topic. In particular, as employer SNS checks become more commonplace and, in some cases, more intrusive, reports of this practise have spread and are becoming more expected by prospective employees (Clark and Roberts, 2010).

## **1.2 Nature of the problem**

SNSs are frequently utilised as forums for personal communication between friends; however, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the safety of information posted on these sites is not guaranteed. Users are becoming more aware of possible risks to their privacy, including flaws in the websites, the consequences of careless information-sharing behaviour, and the practise of SNS checks conducted by employers. Awareness of these risks may be having a significant effect on how users employ SNSs. The practise of employer SNS checks, and its potential impact, is of particular interest in this study. Clark and Roberts (2010) propose that such SNS checks could diminish the usefulness of these sites as a means of communication, as users will fear judgement by current or prospective employers, and so, alter their online behaviours.

## **1.3 Research Aim and Objectives**

### **1.3.1 Research Aim**

The aim of this research is to explore current SNS use amongst students within Aberystwyth University, with particular regard to information-sharing and privacy behaviours, and to investigate the potential impact of employer surveillance on their future SNS use.

### **1.3.2 Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are:

- To describe how Aberystwyth students are currently using SNSs (websites employed, frequency of SNS use, and reasons for use).
- To examine information disclosure practises and identify to whom information is made available.
- To assess perceived importance of privacy, and to ascertain confidence in protecting online information.
- To investigate the privacy concerns faced by SNS users, and to identify chosen methods of protecting information.
- To establish awareness of, and reactions to employer surveillance of SNS, and explore the potential impact of this practise in relation to anticipated future SNS use.
- To consider the findings from this study in relation to existing research, and develop recommendations for SNS users regarding protection of information, for employers regarding appropriate recruitment practises, and for SNSs themselves regarding the needs and requirements of the user community.

## **1.4 Scope of the research**

This study was conducted within the student population of Aberystwyth University. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students were included in analysis, though postgraduates were focused on in qualitative data collection. The type of

SNS studied was limited to a particular subset of social websites. According to Keenan and Shiri (2009), there are two main types:

- People-focused, where social interaction involves the sharing of personal content centred on the user's profile/homepage (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc.).
- Activity-focused, in which social interaction is based on site-specific content relating to a particular theme/subject (e.g. YouTube for video content, Flickr for photographs).

For the purposes of this study, people-focused SNSs were of interest. Users of these sites possibly participate more actively and share more personal information with their online connection compared to users of activity-focused SNSs.

## ***1.5 Structure of dissertation***

Chapter One introduces the subject of this research project, providing contextual information regarding the topics under investigation, and outlining the study's aims and objectives.

Chapter Two provides a review of existing literature relating to contemporary SNS usage, privacy issues on SNSs, SNS profile checks by employers, and the potential outcomes of this practise.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach taken to investigate the research question, discusses the sampling method used, and describes methods of data collection and analysis employed by the researcher.

Chapter Four presents the findings as collected from the interviews and questionnaires.

Chapter Five discusses the analysed results from the previous chapter in reference to existing research.

Chapter Six reflects on the outcomes of this research study, and provides recommendations for the future.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

With the development of online communities, “a more digital approach for maintaining and establishing relationships” (Madhusudhan, 2012, p.100) has become the norm. SNSs are possibly the most popular means of online communication, enabling users to share information to a selected online audience and allowing them to keep up-to-date with their friends’ lives.

While SNSs represent a popular and vibrant means of social communication, they have raised concerns. The widespread practise of sharing personal information on SNSs has encouraged a great deal of debate into the idea of online privacy. When engaging with SNSs, users are encouraged to divulge personal details, and often do so without thought to maintaining privacy.

The debate regarding SNSs and privacy has also spread into the professional environment. Employers have reaped the benefits of SNSs, in being able to search through profiles of potential job candidates and recruit those whose profiles demonstrate their suitability for the position. However, the tendency amongst employers of checking non-professional SNS profiles has been the subject of some contention, with job applicants arguing that this practise is an invasion of their privacy. Research such as Clark and Roberts (2010) argue that SNS checks may have detrimental effects on future SNS usage, both from the perspective of its users and for the SNS itself.

This chapter will discuss these issues in greater detail.



## **2.2 Social networking site use**

### **2.2.1 Social networking sites**

As defined by Park (2010), social networking sites (SNSs) are “profile-based websites that allow users to maintain social relationships by viewing, visiting, and sharing their lists of social connections with other members” (p.417). SNSs allow for the creation of an individual’s digital personality within an online community (Marsoof, 2011). According to Li (2011), characteristic features of social networking sites include:

1. Blogging features: where users can post content (including multimedia content) and their social connections (Friends/Followers) can post feedback.
2. Social groups: where users can group together based on commonalities (e.g. location, workplace, place of study).
3. Networking: users can add/delete friends.
4. Instant messaging: users can send instant messages to their connections.

### **2.2.2 Popularity of SNSs**

SNSs were first introduced in 1997 with SixDegrees.com, but it wasn’t until the creation of Facebook in 2004 that they grabbed mainstream attention. They have since become increasingly popular, and are among the most visited websites on the Internet (Keenan and Shiri, 2009). Facebook is the most popular, with over one billion active users, generating the conception of “Facebook as email for the 21st century” (Hammond, 2007), yet other SNSs such as Twitter, Google+, and LinkedIn are widely used.

SNSs play an important part in users’ lives, particularly amongst teenagers and young adults. DeGagne and Wolk’s (2006) study noted that the majority of respondents pegged SNSs as their “primary online addiction” (Strater & Lipford, 2008, p.1), while studies such as Ellison et al (2007) and Pempek et al (2009) report that students spend up to half an hour a day on SNSs, regardless of how busy they may be, suggesting that SNSs have “been integrated into the daily lives of young

adults” (Pempek, 2009, p.236). University students are heavy SNS users, with Madhusudhan (2012), Haneefa and Sumitha (2011), and Barkhuus and Tashiro (2010) finding that students generally visited their profiles many times throughout the day.

### **2.2.3 Use of SNSs**

The value of SNSs lies in their ability to keep people connected. Maintaining pre-existing relationships is a significant part of SNS use (Pempek et al, 2009; Lenhart and Madden, 2007). Other uses of SNSs include meeting new people, sharing and collecting news/information, finding jobs, online learning, or simply passing the time (Madhusudhan, 2012). Several studies have noted that different user groups use SNSs differently, with SNS usage changing in response to the user’s needs. For example, Park (2010), in looking at the SNS “Cyworld”, found that postgraduate students preferred to use Cyworld for reasons related to their study or future profession.

### **2.2.4 Information disclosure on SNSs**

Sharing information is an important part of using SNSs, and this practise is actively encouraged by SNSs, in providing a number of disclosure categories, in which users can input personal information, as well as allowing users to post information on their own profiles and their Friends’ profiles.

SNS users prefer to provide accurate self-presentations. Strater and Lipford (2008, p.2) note that “in order to create a descriptive and accurate impression on viewers, users often respond honestly and in the majority of disclosure categories”. De Souza and Dick (2009) proposed a number of reasons for self-disclosures in online communities- peer pressure, desire to be portrayed in a particular manner, trust in the network and other members, perceived benefits vs. costs of sharing information, SNS interface, and relaxed attitudes to privacy. Chen and Michaels (2012) note the importance of the online community in information disclosure, stating

that users wish to identify within the community and desire feedback affirming their membership from other users.

What frequently draws attention to information-sharing on SNSs is the posting of potentially sensitive/controversial information. SNS users frequently update their profiles with highly personal information, using SNS profiles “as billboards about themselves while others use them as personal diary pages” (Clark and Roberts, 2010, p.507). Included in this is information that could be construed as inappropriate. Studies such as Morgan et al (2010) and Go et al (2012) have noted the occurrence of foul language, sexist/racist comments, evidence of intoxication, sexually explicit material, and professional indiscretions on SNS profiles.

Sharing information publicly is a trend amongst SNS users, with Pempek et al (2009) noting that students were twice as likely to post information on each-others’ walls rather than send messages privately. However, some studies have noted that although some adolescents are posting personal/identifying information, it is not to the extent that many believe. Nosko et al (2010) found that users are exercising “some discretion regarding what kinds of revealing information they are willing to share” (p. 408), while Strater and Lipford (2008) noted that users share information they deem safe, and judge their disclosures based on the social norms of their network, suggesting the influential role of the user’s audience.

## **2.3 Social networking and privacy**

### **2.3.1 What is privacy?**

The right to privacy is protected under Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “[n]o one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attack upon his honour and reputation” (cited in Marsoof, 2011, p.112). Many countries, including the UK, recognise the individual’s right to privacy.

A common theme related to privacy is the control of personal information with Clark and Roberts (2010) noting that “there is a general belief that there is a natural right to have some information about oneself kept from others” (p.511).

### **2.3.2 The right to privacy on SNSs**

Legally, there is no clear consensus over online privacy. On the one hand, SNS users have the right to privacy; however, they must be aware that information shared online may go public (Smith and Kidder, 2010).

It is argued that information shared online loses its claim to privacy as what is posted online has a lower “expectation of privacy” (Barnes et al, 2009, p.32), due to the potentially large audience and difficulties in controlling access to information. Posting information on SNSs can be looked on as self-publication, and “a person’s right to privacy ceases once the individual publishes the information” (Clark and Roberts, 2010, p.512).

However, Brandenburg (2007) outlines factors that could determine whether an expectation of privacy can exist in an online environment: whether privacy settings are available, to what extent they are implemented, the audience to whom access is granted, and the means used by the unauthorised viewer to access information. In many cases, SNS information is released under certain restrictions, and deliberate steps are taken to protect information. As a result, it could be argued that the owner should be granted a reasonable expectation of, and right to privacy.

### **2.3.3 Maintaining privacy on SNSs**

Maintaining privacy on SNSs is important due to the presence of personal/sensitive information, which, if made publicly available, could harm the user. SNS users manage their online privacy by controlling the amount/type of uploaded information, or controlling access to information by using privacy settings. Most, if not all, SNSs provide multiple privacy settings (Landman et al, 2010), ranging from the basic (where only a minimum of content is hidden) to more advanced settings (where most information can be hidden). Generally, privacy settings enable users to limit the information that can be viewed by strangers (i.e. individuals not accepted as Friends/Followers), but some sites (e.g. Google+ and Facebook) have also introduced settings allowing users to control the spread of information amongst accepted Friends.

However, privacy maintenance may fail due to individual and system errors (Strater and Lipford, 2008). Particular faults include weak default privacy settings (Byrnside, 2008), the tendency for settings to change without prior notification (Landman et al, 2010), and the difficulty in designing privacy settings to cover all possible outcomes (Chen and Michael, 2012).

SNS users frequently make little use of available privacy settings, possibly due to poor interface design, lack of understanding, conforming to social group expectations, and trust in the online community's security (Strater and Lipford, 2008). Studies such as Byrnside (2008) and Acquisti and Gross (2006) note that users often underestimate their profiles' visibility, while Cho et al (2010) reports that users tend to underestimate their vulnerability to risk. Although users are generally informed through privacy policies as to the visibility of their information, often, these policies are not always read (Arcand et al, 2007).

## **2.4 Employers and SNSs**

### **2.4.1 The practise of SNS checks**

Employers have begun gathering an increasing amount of information about job candidates "to ensure the best fit between an applicant and the employer's organization" (Byrnside, 2008, p.448), and are now beginning to incorporate SNS checks into the decision-making process, viewing them as a convenient means of gathering information about prospective employees.

SNS checks have become more widespread in recent years, particularly in the US (Clark and Roberts, 2010), but with cases also emerging in the UK; e.g. Peacock (2009) found that 12% of surveyed UK employers reported checking applicants' SNS profiles. Significant numbers of employers have reported that online information has influenced their decision, in most cases leading to the disqualification of the candidate over the presence of negative content (Clark and Roberts, 2010).

Employers utilise a number of methods to gain access to online information. Generally, employers will search for applicants using various SNSs and examine

what information is made available. If applicants have privacy settings in place, HR managers will often encourage them to join the company's SNSs as part of the recruitment process (Madera, 2012), or may add these applicants as friends (Brandenburg, 2007). A recent trend amongst US employers is to request that applicants log into their accounts during interviews, or even provide usernames and passwords. The possibility of this practise becoming part of recruitment in the UK has been discussed; Sarah Veale, head of equality and employment rights for the Trades Union Congress (TUC) stated it was likely to spread, especially amongst American businesses with outposts in the UK (Facebook passwords fair game, n.d.). However, US legislation is currently being debated to stop this practise, with some states having already introduced laws against it, thereby perhaps reducing the likelihood of this practise being introduced in the UK.

#### **2.4.2 Reasons for SNS checks**

SNS profiles are attractive to employers in providing an easy and cost-effective way of gathering information about job applicants, compared to traditional background checks which were usually reserved for serious candidates (Branine, 2008). For employers, gathering information is necessary for making an informed decision regarding the right candidate, as once hired, management are limited with regard to disciplinary action (Brandenburg, 2007). Employers argue that it is in the best interests of the company that they gather as much information as possible, due to the need to protect themselves from negligent hiring (Clark and Roberts, 2010). SNSs also serve as a useful means of confirming information given to employers by job applicants, as applicants sometimes misrepresent themselves on applications (Levashina, 2009).

UK recruitment has become increasingly person-orientated (Branine, 2008), and, although academic/professional achievements are still used as a basis for hiring decisions, "non-academic qualities and "fit" within a program are playing an increasingly significant role" (Go et al, 2012, p.296). SNSs enable employers to gain a more comprehensive view of the applicant, as well as providing insight into his/her standard behaviour. Traditional selection methods are frequently subject to bias; they "include a certain element of self-presentation, reflecting "maximal" instead of

“typical” work performance” (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009, p.570). Personal profiles are less likely to highlight information aimed at employers, therefore, possibly affording a more accurate insight into the applicant’s personality/character.

Although applicants may argue that their personal/social life is no indication of their professional behaviour, employers maintain that employees, in having access to sensitive company information, need to demonstrate careful judgement (Brandenburg, 2007). Employers use SNSs in order to evaluate potential employees’ decision-making in sharing personal information, seeing it as an indication of how they might treat company data. Finder (2006; cited in Kluemper and Rosen, 2009) outlined one such case, whereby viewing questionable content on an applicant’s profile raised the question as to the applicant’s reasoning/judgement in posting such information online.

#### **2.4.3 Arguments against SNS checks**

A number of concerns have been raised regarding SNS checks, questioning the appropriateness of such information in hiring decisions.

Employers must be careful when using SNS profiles, so as not to incur accusations of discrimination. Under Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Law, it is illegal for applicants to be disqualified based on certain information; however, an applicant’s profile “often allows easy identification of applicant membership to a protected class” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p.219), as well as providing information regarding other topics “typically off limits in job interviews” (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009, p.568).

The accuracy of judgements based on SNS information has been debated. Although, in general, SNS information is fairly accurate, “the social norm of many SNW sites appears to emphasise bravado, exaggeration and outrageous behaviour” (Slovensky and Ross, 2012, p.60), therefore, information seen by employers may not provide an accurate depiction of how the applicant will behave professionally. Additionally, Barrack et al (2000; cited in Kluemper and Rosen, 2009, p.569) noted that “accuracy of these assessments depends on the information available to the observer”. Availability of information may differ across different profiles, and, as a

result, the ability to make accurate and consistent judgements may be limited. Slovensky and Ross (2012) also note that employers can draw conclusions from incorrect information, by mistakenly accessing profiles not belonging to the applicant or set up without their input. There are no guarantees that online information is accurate; SNS profiles are usually not verified, and false information can easily be posted online.

Lack of objectivity in SNS checks is a problem. Decisions are based on subjective assessments of strangers' profiles in which little context is given, thereby easily leading to misinterpretation of posted content. Employers using SNSs will be exposed to vast amounts of information unrelated to the applicant's career; therefore, employers must be careful not to let personal/social life information affect their judgement of the applicant. Judgements made on SNS information can be biased, especially without policies to guide this practise (Go et al, 2012; Clark and Roberts, 2010). Research from Kluemper and Rosen (2009) reported that judges made consistent and accurate judgements using SNS information; however, these judges received training in assessing SNS information, something which employers frequently lack (Clark and Roberts, 2010). This lack of standardisation leads to significant differences in decision-making.

Lastly, SNS profile checks are likely to invade on the applicant's privacy, in accessing personal information without the owner's knowledge/consent (Byrnside, 2008), or, in cases where the profile owner is informed, placing them under pressure to allow access to this content, and taking from them "the right to decide whether, and to whom, to disclose information in an atmosphere free from coercion" (Slovensky and Ross, 2012, p.63)

#### **2.4.4 Possible impact of SNS checks**

Existing research has debated the merits of employer SNS checks, documenting and justifying its use in selecting employees, whilst noting problems faced by profile owners and employers wishing to select the right applicant.

Of interest in this study are the potential implications of this practise becoming widespread. Continuation of this practise may have potential consequences beyond



an individual being refused a position. SNS checks may have negative results for organisations engaging in this practise. Madera (2012) notes that employers must be aware that applicants may react negatively to the incorporation of SNS information into the decision-making process, and may perhaps lead to a negative perception of the organisation. SNSs themselves may also suffer as a result. Clark and Roberts (2010) predict a grim future for these sites, asserting that SNSs may be rendered inferior due to this practise, with users modifying their online behaviour for fear of judgement or punishment by employers.

The points raised by these studies have interesting implications for both employers and SNSs. To further analyse the possibility of this occurring, this study choose to examine how students (a significant SNS user-group) react to the possibility of SNS checks in their future professional endeavours, and to ascertain the possible impact employer surveillance will have on future SNS use.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

SNSs have become an important means of communication for contemporary audiences, with usage of these sites both frequent and important for users. SNS users are encouraged, by both social influences and SNS design, to share vast amounts of personal information with their online community. While privacy settings are in place to protect information from unwanted viewers, users may be left vulnerable due to flaws inherent in privacy settings and lack of awareness/knowledge regarding availability of personal content. This may damage the user's professional prospects, as information may be accessible by future employers, who are likely to use this information as a basis for hiring decisions. The appropriateness of this practise has been debated throughout the literature, with both advantages and disadvantages apparent. However, SNS checks may have potential consequences in the future that will impact users, employers and the sites themselves.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the research process undertaken throughout the course of this study.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to address this study's objectives. Quantitative data was gathered using a web-based questionnaire distributed to the student population of Aberystwyth University. Qualitative data was gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews with postgraduate students. Participants were recruited online through a snowball sampling method. Questionnaire data later underwent statistical analysis in order to determine trends in behaviour/attitudes. Qualitative data from the interviews was analysed by the researcher to uncover important themes relating to the research questions.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the chosen methodological approach. The research design is described, discussing chosen methods of data collection and analysis, with consideration given to their strengths and weaknesses. The target population and sampling method are outlined. Finally, ethical issues are considered, and the limitations of the study are reflected on.

### **3.2 Research Methodology**

The research methodology "refers to the procedural framework within which the research is conducted" (Amaratunga et al, 2002, p.18). Researchers have debated as how best to conduct research, with particular regard to methodological approach. Research methods in the social sciences fall into two distinct categories- the quantitative approach/paradigm and the qualitative approach/paradigm involving not only different methods of data collection and analysis, but also contrasting viewpoints on the nature of reality and knowledge.

### **3.2.1 Quantitative Approach**

The quantitative approach asserts that reality is objective and amenable to rigorous scientific investigation, as in the natural sciences (Clarke and Dawson, 1999). Quantitative methods involve statistical analysis of numerical data, usually with the purpose of testing hypotheses generated from theory (Walliman, 2006).

Quantitative methods are “commonly used to determine the present status of a given phenomenon” (Powell and Connaway, 2004, p.83). They are quick and economical, and allow surveying of a large proportion of the target population and analysis of large datasets. Quantitative methods are seen as a more objective approach (Amaratunga et al, 2002, p.22). Findings usually can be generalised across larger populations.

Although quantitative methods are appropriate for describing what has happened, “they offer little insight into the social processes which actually account for the changes observed” (Clarke and Dawson, 1999, p.55). They inform researchers about patterns of social interaction, but fail to provide explanations as to how/why events have happened, and do not aid researchers in generating theory (Amaratunga et al, 2002).

### **3.2.2 Qualitative Approach**

The qualitative approach proposes that there are multiple, subjective realities, and uses techniques which focus more on language and the interpretation of its meaning. Data collection methods “tend to involve close human involvement and a creative process of theory development rather than testing” (Walliman, 2006, p.37). Qualitative research methods use smaller data sets, but allow for more in-depth analysis.

Qualitative methods focus on ‘lived experience’, and seek to describe “the meanings people place on the events, processes and structures of their lives” (Amaratunga et al, 2002, p.22). Qualitative methods are considered the best approach in explorative research and for the development of hypotheses. It is useful when wishing to expand on quantitative data collected from the same setting (Amaratunga et al, 2002).

However, as noted by Pickard (2007), in using qualitative methods, researchers face a number of issues. Analysis of qualitative data is subjective, so results produced from such studies are dependent on the researcher's interpretation. Results are not readily applied to other similar situations, and there is difficulty in generalising data across the wider population. The questions of reliability and credibility are common with qualitative research.

### **3.2.3 Mixed Methods**

While qualitative and quantitative research methods each offer numerous benefits, they are not without drawbacks. Both have underlying flaws, which may threaten the validity of the research. To compensate for this, many researchers have proposed that a mixed methods approach is the most appropriate to use.

The mixed method approach involves "research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches... in a single study or program of inquiry" (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4). Mixed methods approach allows for methods triangulation, whereby the consistency of research findings can be checked by using different methods of data collection. Researchers believe "the biases, limitations, and weaknesses of a method following one approach are counterbalanced, or compensated for, by mixing with a method of the opposite approach" (Fidel, 2008, p.265). This may lead to increased validity and reliability of results. The mixed method approach is also used in cases when a single approach fails to investigate the phenomenon thoroughly; it "amplifies the richness and complexity of the research findings" (Fidel, 2008, p.266). Results from one method are supported and enhanced by results of the other- researchers can seek explanations for quantitative results, or generalise qualitative results and test their validity.

In order to gather both large-scale data and comprehensive insights, and to offset weaknesses in each method, a mixed-methods approach was chosen as the most appropriate method for this study. The researcher carried out an online questionnaire (primarily quantitative data) and several semi-structured interviews

with members of the target population in order to fully address the objectives of this study.

### **3.3 Methods of Data Collection**

#### **3.3.1 Literature Review**

Prior to collecting primary data, the researcher carried out a literature review to gain a wider view of the topic of interest, and to identify issues to be investigated throughout this study.

Current research was explored using the resources of Aberystwyth University Library. Online bibliographical resources such as LISA, LISTA, Emerald, Science Direct and ERIC were used to retrieve research articles addressing the research questions. Search terms such as “social networking sites” AND “privacy”; “online privacy”; “employer surveillance”; “social networking sites” AND “employers”, were among those used to retrieve relevant material. Further material was discovered using the references in the originally retrieved texts. Biggam (2011) recommends this method of obtaining relevant literature. The researcher also made use of Internet search engines such as Google Scholar and Google News to seek out additional current research and news stories related to the research topic.

Throughout the literature review, the researcher explored the underlying issues regarding online privacy and employer surveillance, and identified the research questions to be investigated. The existing literature also provided a context in which analysed data could be discussed, allowing the researcher to relate, and compare, her results to existing research.

#### **3.3.2 Primary Data Collection**

##### ***3.3.2.1 Justification for Research Methods***

Rowley (2012) notes the advantage of questionnaires is the ease in getting responses from many people, therefore, possibly generating more generalizable findings. Questionnaires are easy and economical to distribute, and, as participants

are anonymous, they are more likely to answer truthfully. Being able to distribute the questionnaires online increased the likelihood of reaching more participants, particularly amongst undergraduates who were not in Aberystwyth during the time of data collection. However, questionnaires pose certain difficulties. Low response rates problematic, with questionnaires often handed in partially completed or not at all. Members outside of the target population may respond. Questionnaires do not gather additional data; therefore, researchers are unable to expand on interesting topics. Researchers are unable to clarify responses gathered; therefore, there may be difficulty in ascertaining what the respondent meant.

Interviews enable researchers to explore the outlooks of others more comprehensively. Interviewees have time to think, and so may give fuller accounts of their attitudes/behaviour. Questions and responses can be clarified; therefore, the researcher has a greater opportunity to explore the respondent's opinions, and to determine the correct meaning. A semi-structured interview was chosen, as it provided the researcher with sufficient guidelines in asking questions while still allowing flexibility (Rowley, 2012). Interviews are disadvantageous in being costly and time-consuming. Researchers are only able to gather responses from a small sample, thus, they can be less confident that collected data supports generalisation to the population (Rowley, 2012). Lack of anonymity may affect participants' responses.

### **3.3.2.2 Pilot Study**

Pilot studies are recommended in both questionnaires and interviews (Rowley, 2012). They indicate areas of ambiguity, and, with interviews, allow the researcher to conduct a trial run and make note of any faults with regard to interview technique or potential problems with recording devices.

The researcher tested the survey on three individuals, requesting feedback regarding possible improvement. The pilot test participants were not affiliated with Aberystwyth University, but were of a similar age and education level of the target population. The researcher carried out and recorded one pilot interview, making notes of any potentially confusing questions. After the interview was finished, the

researcher asked for feedback. The researcher then made the appropriate adjustments based on their own notes and those of the participants.

### **3.3.2.3 Population**

The researcher gathered participants from within the student population of Aberystwyth University. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students were recruited for the survey in order to gain a more comprehensive view of online behaviour of the entire student population. For the interviews, the researcher decided to focus exclusively on postgraduate students, as they were more easily accessed (more likely to remain in Aberystwyth throughout the summer at which point the data was to be collected), and would be beneficial in gaining insight on views of privacy and employer surveillance amongst emerging professionals. Also, it allowed the researcher to ask them to reflect on changes in their use of SNSs and their online behaviour throughout their university careers, thereby gaining perspectives in how online behaviour changes.

### **3.3.2.4 Questionnaire**

The topics covered in the questionnaire were chosen after the literature review identified topics of interest. A web-based, semi-structured questionnaire was created using the survey-building software from Qualtrics.com. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen questions in total, and was made up of both open-ended and closed questions (Appendix 5). Open-ended questions were used when a set number of choices would have limited participant feedback, or where the researcher was unsure of all possible responses. These were also used for the collection of qualitative data, which was later expanded on and discussed throughout the interviews. The first four questions collected background information pertaining to the participant. These questions were compulsory to ensure that the researcher would have demographic information on all participants.

### **3.3.2.5 Interviews**

A series of interviews (nine in total) were carried out in order to expand on some of the issues raised earlier in the research process. Topics covered in the interviews were based on areas of interest uncovered throughout the literature review. Interviews took place after the launch of the questionnaire, which allowed for refinement of interview questions in response to initial questionnaire results. A series of closed and open-ended questions were used to guide the researcher during the interview process (Appendix 6).

Participants were asked to fill out a participant information form (Appendix 4), upon which they listed their age, gender, year and area of study, and identified which SNSs they used (noting which one they used the most), when they began using them, and how often they used them. After both forms were filled out, the interview began. The interview covered five main topic areas and consisted of 25 questions. Most of the broader topic questions contained prompts, which were used in cases where the interviewee required further clarification or when the interviewer felt the question hadn't been explored in sufficient detail. On average, the interviews took about 25 minutes to conduct, the shortest taking 20 minutes, and the longest taking 43 minutes.

### **3.3.2.6 Sampling Method**

The researcher made use of personal contacts in order to spread word about the study, through a method known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as “a chain referral sampling method that relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects” (Johnston and Sabin, 2010, p.38), and is useful in exploratory, qualitative and descriptive research (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). The initial “seeds” in snowball sampling were selected via a convenience sample. Potential questionnaire participants were contacted through the researcher’s social networking profile, and were requested to forward the message to other students. The researcher posted a call for participants on Facebook groups related to Aberystwyth University, and also contacted university staff via email, asking them to forward the questionnaire on to current students. A reminder post was distributed



two weeks later, which saw an immediate increase in the number of questionnaire responses.

### **3.3.2.7 Ethical Considerations**

This research was designed in line with the ethical guidelines set out by The British Sociological Association's "Statement of Ethical Practise", the British Psychological Society's "Code of Ethics and Conduct" and Aberystwyth Department of Information Studies "Ethics Policy for Research".

Participants were required to read, and approve, a consent form (Appendix and 3) before participating in the study. The consent forms provided information regarding:

- The purpose of the study
- The participant's role in the study
- Use/storage of their information
- Ethical issues

The consent form assured participants that they would remain anonymous throughout the research process, that their information could be accessed by the researcher only, and that all information pertaining to them would be stored securely before being erased. They were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time, at which stage their details would be excluded from analysis and destroyed.

In general, student identities were unknown to the researcher. Certain students personally contacted via Facebook were known to the researcher. However, as the researcher cannot determine which contacts actually participated in the questionnaire, their anonymity is secure. The questionnaires were distributed via an anonymous link which ensured that personal information belonging to the participant could not be tracked by Qualtrics.com.. Before being exported to the SPSS database for analysis, the questionnaire data was stored in the Qualtrics account database, which was password protected.

Interview participants were not anonymous to the researcher. However, they were reminded that they would not be identified, nor would any of their input be attributed to them. Participants were asked permission for the interview to be recorded on the researcher's personal device.

All data were treated in accordance to the Data Protection Act 1998. Both questionnaire and interview data were transferred onto the researcher's personal computer; questionnaire data was exported into the SPSS database and interview content was transcribed. Participants were assigned individual ID numbers in order to ensure anonymity. The researcher's computer was password protected, and, when not in use, stored in the researcher's private accommodation, where nobody but the researcher would have access to it.

### **3.4 Methods of Data Analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Quantitative data**

Questionnaires were stored in the Qualtrics database once completed by participants. The Qualtrics database was used to create reports organising data from the surveys into charts and graphs. These reports provided summaries of responses from each question, and were used in order to carry out preliminary analysis of responses.

The researcher also used the SPSS statistical software package in order to carry out additional analysis. Questionnaire responses were downloaded from the Qualtrics database and imported into the SPSS database. Responses to closed questions were coded prior to the launch of the questionnaire. Open-ended responses were coded manually. The original responses were also being used to inform the qualitative results.

A number of incomplete questionnaires were submitted by participants. Out of the 150 questionnaires submitted, only 108 were properly filled. The remaining 42 failed to fill in the majority of questions, and so, were excluded from analysis.

### **3.4.2 Qualitative data**

Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis, to ensure that all content was made note of, reducing the likelihood of interviewer bias in recording responses, and allowing the interviewer to properly engage with the participant. The availability of a recording also helps ensure that the data is accurate (Walliman, 2006).

In analysing qualitative data, the researcher took into consideration guidelines laid out by Rowley (2012). The researcher began by familiarising herself with the data gathered through numerous readings. By doing this, the researcher became familiar with key points made, and, in doing so, became acquainted with patterns and themes prevalent in the data. Datasets were organised into categories and codes were assigned to the different themes established in each interview (Appendix 7).

## **3.5 Limitations**

The research methods chosen were limited in certain respects.

The interviews cannot claim to be fully representative of the Aberystwyth student population. Although the researcher managed to incorporate both UK and international students, and students from different departments within the university, the small sample size and gender bias affects external validity. Interviews were conducted with postgraduate students only. Undergraduate students likely would have offered interesting insights into the interview topics; however, they were unavailable to the researcher at the time of data collection.

Questionnaires pose difficulty to researchers, as they must ensure that questions are clear and understandable to participants (Bell, 2005). Although the researcher strove to keep questions simple, the lack of contact with participants meant that she could not be certain that all participants were sure of what was being asked. A number of questions were left open-ended, which proves challenging for data analysis, as it is vital to understand what the respondent means in order to correctly code the responses. Non-response was also a problem.

When compared to the entire Aberystwyth student population (approximately 15,000 students), the sample gathered for this study is relatively small. It is likely that a significant proportion of the population may have been unaware of the study, and as a result, failed to take part. Due to the chosen sampling method, the researcher was unable to precisely determine how many students were reached, making it difficult to calculate the sample size in relation to entire population. Using a non-random sampling method limits the amount of statistical analysis that can be carried out, and, as it cannot guarantee a representative sample, it may limit the external validity of the sample (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). Magnani et al (2002) reminds researchers that the initial “seeds” chosen will have an impact on the composition of the entire sample. Participants in this study are self-selecting; therefore, it is likely that they are not entirely representative of the Aberystwyth student population.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach adopted throughout the course of this study. After debating the advantages of different research methods, the mixed method approach was chosen, and a combination of web-based questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were developed. While both these methods have their limitations, they were deemed useful in gathering both broad quantitative data to analysis trends in students’ online attitudes/behaviour, as well as gaining deeper insight into their experiences. The data collected will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

This study looks more at accessing insights and developing understanding into students’ online attitudes and behaviours, rather than testing the reliability and validity of hypotheses deducted from previous research. As a result, the extent to which the findings of this research can be generalised to the wider population is constrained. Instead, this study acts more as a springboard for further research on this topic.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter details the results of the questionnaire and interviews carried out with students of Aberystwyth University. In order to explore students' SNS use and the possible effects of privacy concerns and employer surveillance on their online activities, the following objectives were undertaken:

- To investigate how students are using SNSs.
- To identify how, and with whom, they are sharing information.
- To establish attitudes towards online privacy and identify methods of protecting information.
- To identify awareness and opinions regarding employer surveillance, and examine the impact this may have.
- To discuss changing SNS use.

The remainder of this chapter outlines the results gathered from the questionnaires and interviews, presented separately below. Further analyses of these findings in relation to existing literature will be discussed in the following chapter.

## 4.2 Questionnaire

### 4.2.1 Demographic profile

The questionnaire sample consisted of 36 males (33.3%) and 72 females (66.7%), ranging in age from 18 to 61 years (mean age=24.6 years). There were 64 undergraduates (59.3%) and 44 postgraduates (40.7%). The breakdown of participants by year of study is as follows:

Years completed within Aberystwyth	No.	%
Commencing 1 <sup>st</sup> year *	12	11.1
1 year undergraduate completed	18	16.7
2years undergraduate completed	19	17.6
3years undergraduate completed	12	11.1
4years undergraduate completed	2	1.9
5years undergraduate completed	1	0.9
1year postgraduate completed	40	37.0
2years postgraduate completed	1	0.9
3years postgraduate completed	1	0.9
4years postgraduate completed	1	0.9
5years postgraduate completed	1	0.9
Total	108	100.0

**Table 4.1 Breakdown of participants by years completed within Aberystwyth University**

*\*Students are now enrolled in their first year at Aberystwyth University (Academic year 2012-2013)*

### 4.2.2. SNS use

#### ***SNSs used by respondents***

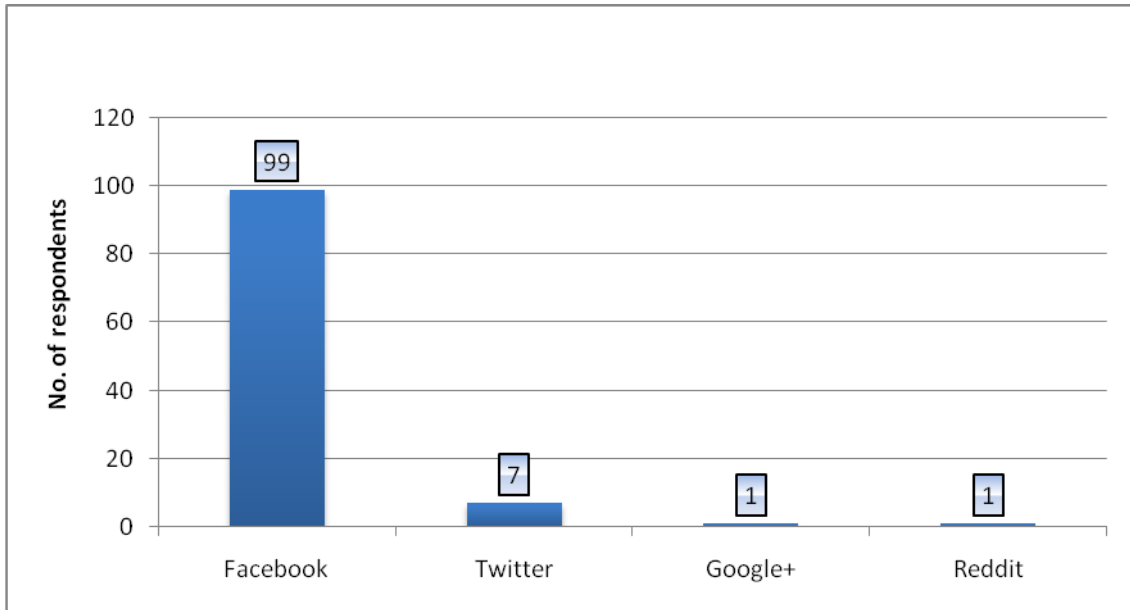
Participants were required to list the SNSs they used. 32 websites were reported (Table 4.2).

Website	No.	%	Website	No.	%
Facebook	106	98.1	Plenty of Fish	1	0.9
Twitter	49	45.4	Wayn	1	0.9
Google+	9	8.3	Blogspot	1	0.9
MySpace	2	1.9	Wordpress	1	0.9
LinkedIn	11	10.2	Livejournal	2	1.9
YouTube	7	6.5	DeviantArt	2	1.9
Netvibes	1	0.9	Vkontakte	1	0.9
Pinterest	5	4.6	Studivz	1	0.9
Del.icio.us	3	2.8	Couchsurfing	1	0.9
Academic.edu	1	0.9	Diaspora	2	1.9
Reddit	2	1.9	Stumbleupon	1	0.9
Goodreads	2	1.9	InsaneJournal	1	0.9
Tumblr	11	10.2	Last.FM	1	0.9
FriendsReunited	1	0.9	Flickr	1	0.9
Xing	1	0.9	MSN	2	1.9
Plenty of Fish	1	0.9	Gamedecider	1	0.9

**Table 4.2 SNSs used by respondents**

Facebook was identified as most widely used (98.1%), followed by Twitter (45.4%). LinkedIn and Tumblr (10.2%), and Google+ (8.3%) were also somewhat popular.

Respondents were also asked to identify which SNS they used most frequently (Figure 4.1). The majority of participants (91.7%) identified Facebook as their most-used SNS, followed by Twitter (6.5%), and Google+/Reddit (0.9%).



**Figure 4.1 SNSs reported as most often used by respondents**

### **Frequency of SNS use**

Most respondents identified themselves as frequent SNS users (Table 4.3), with 94 respondents (87%) visiting SNSs once a day or more.

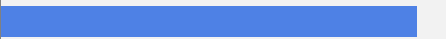





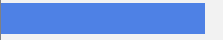

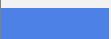

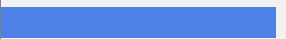

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Less than once a week		2	1.9%
2	Once a week		1	0.9%
3	A couple of times a week (2-3 days)		3	2.8%
4	Most days during the week (4-6 days)		8	7.4%
5	Once a day		13	12.0%
6	More than once a day		26	24.1%
7	Many times throughout the day		55	50.9%
	Total		108	100%

**Table 4.3 Frequency of SNS use**



### **Reasons for SNS use**

Participants reported multiple reasons when asked why they used SNSs (Table 4.4).

#	Answer		No.	%
1	To keep in touch with people you do not see regularly		100	92.6%
2	To contact people you see on a regular basis		76	70.4%
3	To keep up to date with what is happening in your friends' lives		88	81.5%
4	To keep friends updated with what is happening in your life		42	38.9%
5	To meet new people		13	12.0%
6	To promote yourself		13	12.0%
7	To keep up-to-date with news and events in the wider world		49	45.4%
8	To keep up-to-date with information about famous/well-known people in whom you have an interest		30	27.8%
9	To develop and maintain professional contacts		26	24.1%
10	To look for and share information related to university coursework or work-related tasks		59	55.6%
11	To keep up-to-date with news and events occurring within your institution/network (i.e. within your school, university, place of work)		66	61.1%
12	Other (please specify)		9	8.3%

**Table 4.4 Reasons for SNS use**

Frequently reported reasons were keeping in touch with people; including people met with only occasionally (92.6%), and people seen frequently (70.4%).

For some, SNSs were used to keep updated with news regarding famous/well-known individuals (27.8%), within networks/institutions (61.1%), and in the wider world (45.4%). SNSs were particularly used to keep abreast with Friends' news (81.5%); however, only 38.9% of respondents reported using SNSs to keep their Friends up-to-date with *their* news. The disparity may indicate a preference amongst respondents to view others' information rather than posting their own.

Least reported reasons were meeting new people (12%) and self-promotion (12%). Social use of SNSs was predominant; only 24.1% used SNSs for professional networking. However, 55.6% reported sharing University coursework information and/or employment-related information.

Other reasons attributed to using SNSs included:

- Organising events
- Entertainment/comedic value
- Procrastination
- To exhibit art/photography work.
- Transferring files

### ***Information-sharing on SNSs***

Respondents were required to identify the information posted on their profiles, and to indicate to whom it was available (Table 4.5).

	General Public	Friends and their friends only	Friends only	Myself only	Not certain who can view	Unavailable/ unsure if available
Screen name/ pseudonym/nickname	50	7	14	1	2	23
Full name	54	12	26	5	4	7
Date of Birth	20	6	46	25	4	4
Hometown	30	11	39	12	4	8
Current address	7	3	27	33	1	32
Education history	15	15	59	5	6	6
Employment history	7	10	46	15	4	21
Family information	6	6	53	15	5	19
Friends list	28	19	42	9	5	4
Relationship status	14	7	44	18	4	17
Sexual orientation	13	8	31	20	3	27
Political views	7	6	35	15	3	37
Religious views	8	7	36	15	3	34
Email address	4	4	46	26	8	15
Contact number	1	1	24	36	4	36
Personal website	5	0	20	14	7	56
Full address	1	0	8	34	3	55
Interests	11	14	55	2	7	15
Posted photographs	6	16	74	2	5	1
Photographs in which you are tagged	7	25	61	5	5	2
Posted videos	5	11	63	3	5	15
Videos in which you are tagged	5	19	54	5	6	12
Wall posts on own wall	9	11	72	4	7	1
Notes/Blogs	8	8	46	1	4	32
Events you have created	4	12	61	2	6	16
Events you are attending	5	19	58	2	11	7
Communities/Networks/Groups	13	16	52	6	12	5

**Table 4.5 Availability of information posted on SNS profile**

Much of the information posted on SNS profiles was restricted to Friends, excluding full name and screen name with most respondents (50% and 46.3%) making this public. Additionally, respondents' Friends lists were generally shared beyond the respondent.

Although 38% shared their hometown widely, respondents were more cautious with full addresses, with 50.9% believing it to be unavailable, and 31.5% reporting it as viewable only by the respondent himself/herself. Only one respondent made their full address available to the public. Contact numbers were mostly omitted from profiles (33.3%) or made viewable to respondent only (33.3%). However, 22.2% made this information available to their friends. Very few made this information available more widely.

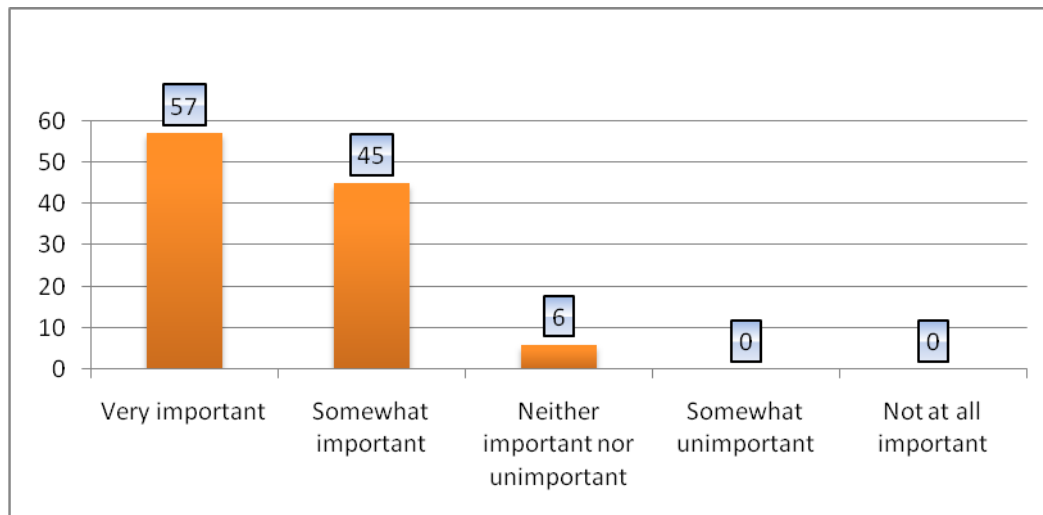
Information regarding relationship status, political stance, religious views, and sexual orientation were generally restricted to Friends, or were omitted altogether. Less than 20% of respondents shared this publicly. Information regarding employment history and education history was generally shared with Friends only (42.6% and 54.6% respectively); only a few respondents (6.5% and 13.9%) made this information public. Photographic/video media were generally restricted to Friends; however media in which respondents were tagged were more often available to Friends of Friends. Created/attended events were also usually restricted to Friends, with low numbers reporting that this information was made available to the public.

Respondents generally appeared to be aware of the audience for their online content, with a minority (11.1% and less) reporting uncertainty over who could view each piece of content.

### 4.2.3. Privacy

#### *Importance of privacy*

The majority of respondents placed some importance in having privacy when using SNSs (Figure 4.2), reporting it as “somewhat important” (41.6%) and “very important” (52.8%).



**Figure 4.2 Importance of online privacy**

Comparisons between genders and education level did not reveal any major differences (Table 4.6). Somewhat more undergraduates placed higher importance in privacy. More females considered privacy “very important”, and somewhat more males than females were ambivalent about privacy.

	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Males	Females
Very important	38 (59.4%)	19 (43.2%)	16 (44.4%)	41 (56.9%)
Somewhat important	23 (35.9%)	22 (50%)	16 (44.4%)	29 (40.3%)
Neither important nor unimportant	3 (4.7%)	3 (6.8%)	4 (11.1%)	2 (2.8%)
Somewhat unimportant	-	-	-	-
Not at all important	-	-	-	-

**Table 4.6 Importance of privacy- comparison by gender and level of education**

### **Privacy concerns**

An open-ended question asked respondents to note down privacy concerns experienced when using SNSs (Table 4.7). 96 responses were given, which were coded for analysis.

Reported Privacy Concern		No. of Responses	%
No response		12	11.1
No concerns		6	5.6
Damage to reputation		3	2.8
Lack of trust in SNS		1	0.9
Loss of privacy		7	6.5
Identity Theft/Fraud		16	14.8
Cyber-bullying		1	0.9
Employers checking profiles		8	7.4
Monitoring of online activities		2	1.9
Data-mining		8	7.4
Understanding privacy settings and keeping up with policy changes		4	3.7
Strangers/Unwanted parties accessing personal information		20	18.5
Inappropriate/Unauthorised use/dissemination of personal information by other people		17	15.7
Hacking		11	10.2
Stalking		4	3.7

**Table 4.7 Reported privacy concerns amongst respondents**

The most frequently reported concern was unwanted people/groups accessing personal information (18.5%) with possible consequences such as identity theft/identity fraud (14.8%), hacking (10.2%), cyber-bullying (0.9%) and stalking (3.7%) noted.

Several respondents were concerned over their information “*getting into the wrong hands*” [QP84] and being used without permission (15.7%), and the potential loss of privacy (6.5%) and damage to reputation (2.7%).

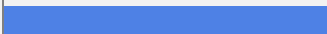

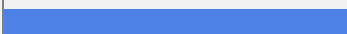

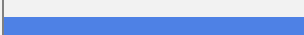

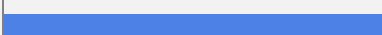

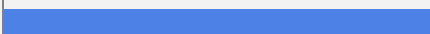

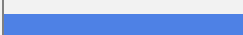


A small proportion of respondents (7.4%) reported concern over employers gaining access to online information not intended for their viewing, as “*some activity that may jeopardise your career*”[QP13].

Some respondents had problems with SNSs themselves, with one indicating that they didn’t trust their SNS, and another four reporting difficulty in keeping up-to-date with privacy changes. Also noted was the possible monitoring of online activities (1.9%) and data-mining (7.4%).

*Selling personal information to third parties without consent. My life should not be a commodity to be sold without my knowledge or approval [QP60].*

### ***Methods of protecting privacy***

Respondents selected from multiple choices their preferred methods of protecting their information (Table 4.8).

#	Answer		No.	%
1	Using strict privacy settings		74	68.5%
2	Blocking content from members of the public (i.e. people you are not friends with)		84	77.8%
3	Limiting the amount of information you upload to your profile		79	73.1%
4	Only uploading information you deem appropriate for a wide audience		77	71.3%
5	Limiting the amount and availability of important personal information (e.g. contact details, descriptive information such as date of birth, address, employment, etc.)		70	64.8%
6	Using a pseudonym or nickname instead of your full name to make it more difficult for members of the public to find your profile.		19	17.6%
7	Using private messaging to communicate information you do not want to make available to a wider audience		87	80.6%
8	Controlling what content you are tagged in (e.g. requiring website to ask for confirmation before you are tagged in a photograph)		45	41.7%
9	Keeping your password secret		99	91.7%
10	Reading the privacy policy for information on how your information is used		28	25.9%
11	Keeping your accounts across different social networking sites separate (i.e. not linked)		55	50.9%
12	Only accepting friend/follower requests from people you already know		84	77.8%
13	Other (please specify)		3	2.8%

**Table 4.8 Reported methods of protecting personal information**

Controlling access to information was widely implemented- blocking content from the public (77.8%); granting access only to known friends (77.8%); and using strict privacy settings (64.8%). The vast majority (91.7%) kept their password secret.

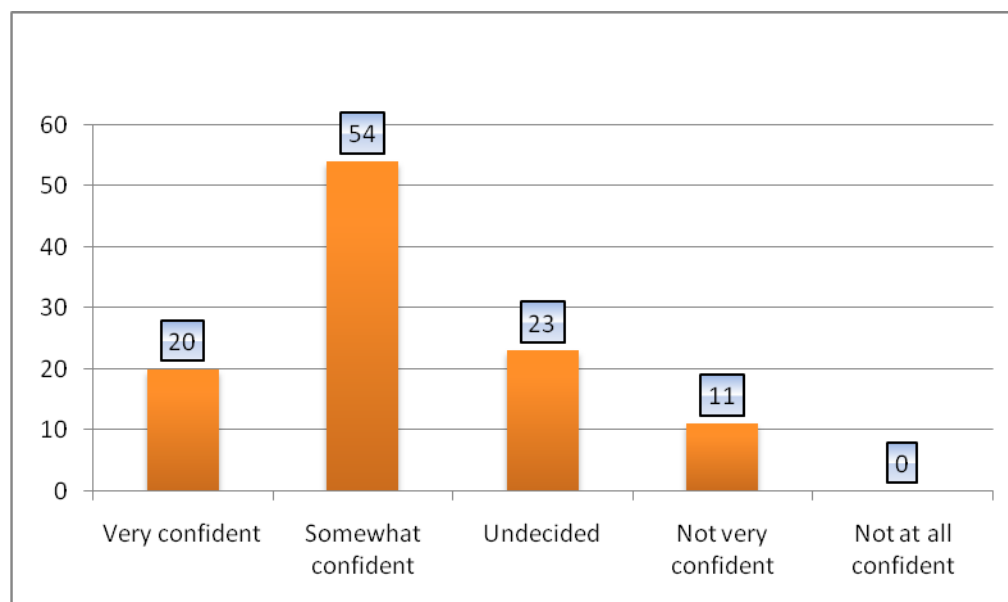


Most respondents also restricted what they shared- 73.1% limited the amount of information uploaded to their profile, with 64.8% limiting identifying information. 41.7% of respondents reported controlling information posted by their Friends. 71.3% only uploaded information appropriate for wide audiences, while 80.6% used private messaging to share sensitive information. 50.9% reported keeping their different SNS accounts separate, thereby maintaining separate online identities.

Some privacy measures were less frequently employed. Only 17.6% employed a pseudonym to protect their identity or prevent strangers from finding them, and only 25.9% reported reading the Privacy Policy for information about controlling their content.

### ***Confidence in protecting privacy***

Most respondents were confident in protecting their information (Figure 4.3), reporting that they were “very confident” (18.5%) and “somewhat confident” (50%).



***Figure 4.3 Reported confidence in ability to protect personal information***

Comparisons between groups did not reveal any major differences in reported confidence (Table 4.9). Somewhat more undergraduates than postgraduates reported being “very confident”; however, more undergraduates also reported being “not very confident”. Responses from males and females were largely similar.

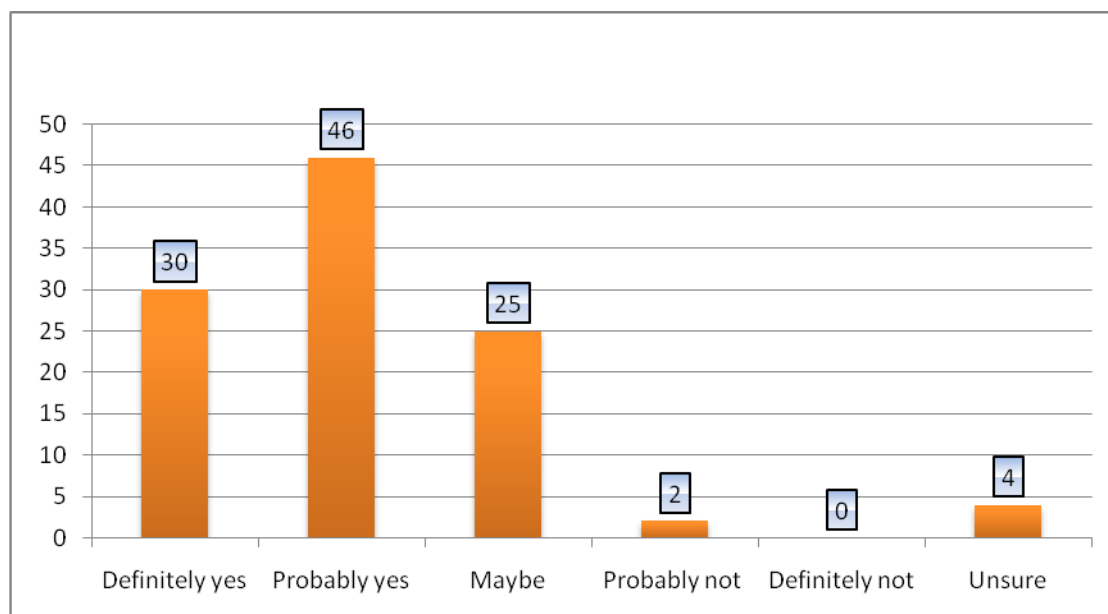
	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Males	Females
Very confident	14 (21.9%)	6 (13.6%)	7 (19.4%)	13 (18.1%)
Somewhat confident	30 (46.9%)	24 (54.5%)	18 (50%)	36 (50%)
Undecided	11 (17.2%)	12 (27.3%)	6 (16.7%)	17 (23.6%)
Not very confident	9 (14.1%)	2 (4.5%)	5 (13.9%)	6 (8.5%)
Not at all confident	-	-	-	-

***Table 4.9 Reported confidence in ability to protect personal information- comparison by gender and level of education***

#### **4.2.4. Employer surveillance**

##### ***Awareness of employer surveillance***

Respondents seemed aware of SNS surveillance by employers (Figure 4.4), reporting that it was very likely (27.8%) and somewhat likely (42.6%). Very few respondents dismissed the possibility of employer surveillance.



**Figure 4.4 Perceived Likelihood of SNS checks**

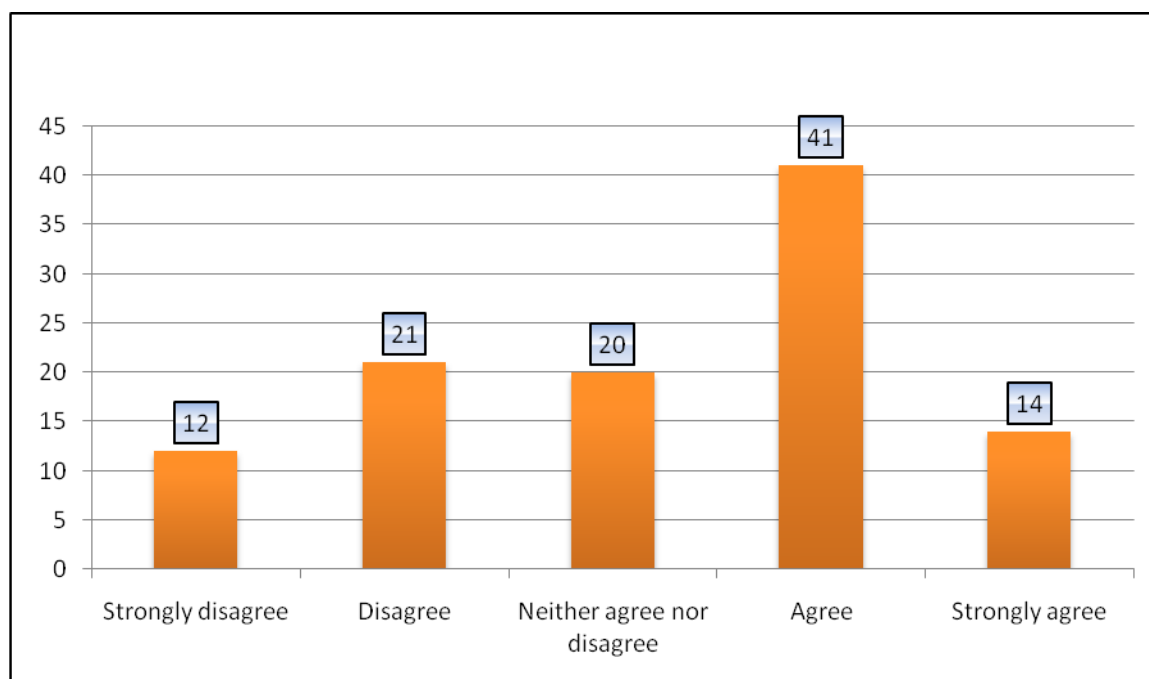
Table 4.10 outlines differing responses based on gender and education level, none of which were particularly diverse. While slightly more postgraduates expressed certainty, a similar percentage of undergraduates and postgraduates were aware of the possibility. Additionally, males and females were equally aware of the possibility, though more males reported certainty in it occurring.

Likelihood of SNS checks	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Males	Females
Definitely yes	14 (21.9%)	16 (36.4%)	13 (36.1%)	17 (23.6%)
Probably yes	30 (46.9%)	16 (36.4%)	12 (33.3%)	34 (47.2 %)
Maybe	15 (23.4%)	10 (22.7%)	8 (22.2%)	17 (23.6%)
Probably not	-	2 (4.5%)	-	2 (2.8%)
Definitely not	-	-	-	-
Unsure	4 (6.3%)	-	2 (8.3%)	1 (1.4%)

**Table 4.10 Perceived likelihood of employers checking SNS profiles- comparisons by gender and level of education**

### ***Impact of employer surveillance***

Responses were mixed regarding the possible effects of SNS checks on future use (Figure 4.5). While 30.6% of the sample reported that their SNS use would not change, a greater proportion (50.9%) reported that it would. 18.5% remained unsure.



***Figure 4.5 Perceived likelihood of employer surveillance affecting personal use of SNSs.***

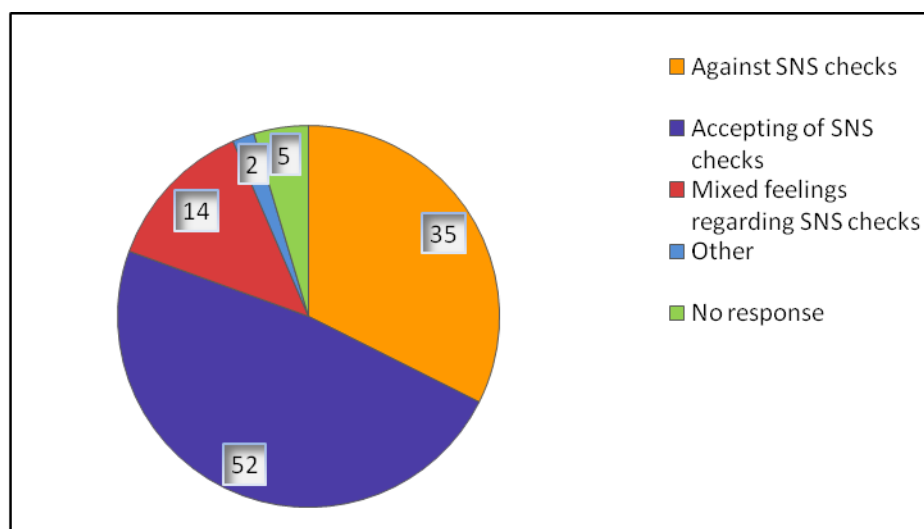
Table 4.11 details the possible impact of SNS surveillance on respondents' SNS use, comparing between undergraduates and postgraduates, and male and female respondents. Both undergraduates and postgraduates reported as equally likely to change SNS use, though slightly more postgraduates reported to "strongly agree" with the possibility. There were no marked differences between males and females.

	Undergraduates	Postgraduates	Males	Females
Strongly disagree	8 (12.5%)	4 (9.1%)	4 (11.1%)	8 (11.1%)
Disagree	12 (18.8%)	9 (20.5%)	6 (16.7%)	15 (20.8%)
Neither agree nor disagree	10 (15.6%)	10 (22.7%)	7 (19.4%)	13 (18.1%)
Agree	28 (43.8%)	13 (29.5%)	14 (38.9%)	27 (37.5%)
Strongly agree	6 (9.4%)	8 (18.2%)	5 (13.9%)	9 (12.5%)

**Table 4.11 Perceived likelihood of employer surveillance affecting personal use of SNSs- comparison by gender and level of education**

### **Reactions to employer surveillance**

An open-ended question was used to ascertain attitudes towards employer SNS checks (Figure 4.6). Out of the 108 respondents, 103 provided an answer, which were coded for analysis. Three groups were established; those against SNS checks (n=35, 32.4%), those accepting of the practise (n=52, 48.1%), and those with mixed feelings (n=14, 13%). Two respondents didn't give a direct opinion.



**Figure 4.6 Respondent reactions to SNS checks**

Those against the idea claimed it to be “*invasive and unethical*” [QP28], “*inappropriate*” [QP96], and “*stalker-ish*” [QP87]. Many were concerned with information being misinterpreted, arguing that SNSs weren’t an accurate representation of their lives. They expressed concern over being judged on this information, particularly if it were to overshadow their educational/professional achievements.

*I hope they'd see any information they found in context, and be tactful about how they used it [QP4]*

Although satisfied with employers checking professionally-orientated profiles, respondents were unhappy with sharing information regarding their personal lives, questioning its relevance. They preferred to keep separate their professional and personal lives.

*What I choose to do in my spare time doesn't indicate the type of individual I will be on the job [QP76]*

Other respondents reported mixed feelings, considering employer surveillance “*annoying but understandable*” [QP86]. Although some disliked their profiles being checked, they could understand the employer’s decision to do so.

A significant proportion (48.1%) reacted more positively. Several were unconcerned with profile checks due to privacy settings in place, while others ensured that their information was appropriate for employers. Also noted was the possibility of making a favourable impression.

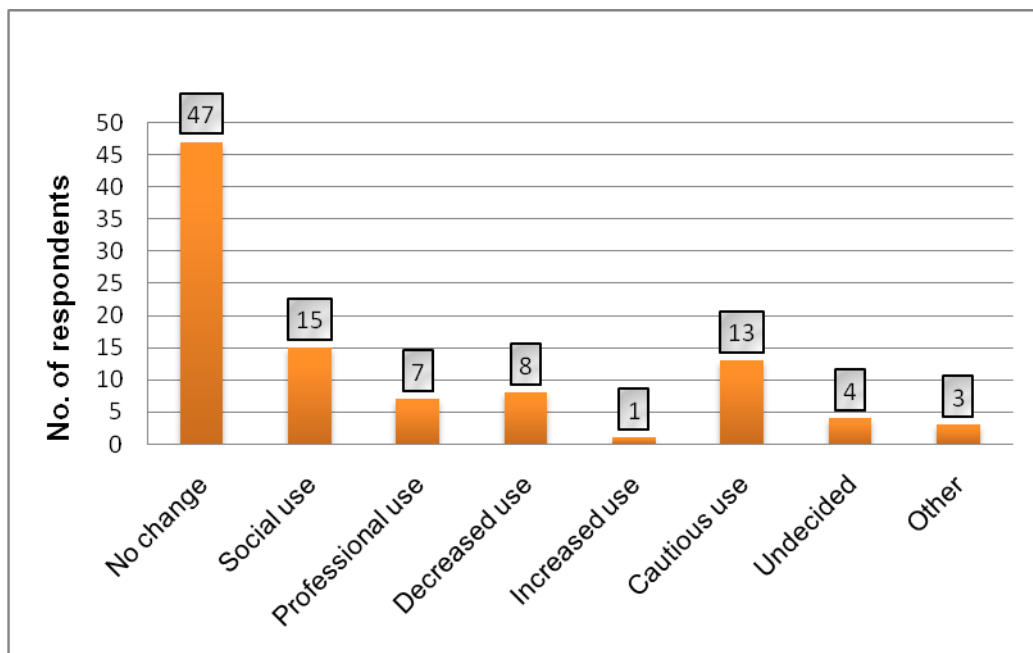
*If people are just a little smart about it, they will use things like Twitter and LinkedIn to enhance their employable image... Therefore being checked online by employers can actually be an advantage [QP15]*

Others argue that employers have the right to look at available online information, arguing that if a user fails to hide information from the public, they cannot expect privacy.

*If I'm stupid enough to place incriminating statuses or photos for all to see then it's my own fault [QP20]*

#### 4.2.5. Future SNS use

An open-ended question required respondents to discuss their expected future SNS use. 95 responses were returned with mixed reactions (Figure 4.7)



**Figure 4.7 Expected future use of SNSs**

Most respondents (43.7%, n=47) indicated that their SNS use would remain unchanged, primarily for social interactions. Another 13.9% reported that they would use also SNSs for social purposes in the future; however they didn't indicate whether this differs from current use.

A small number (n=7, 6.5%) anticipated using SNSs for professional reasons due to its potential for marketing themselves and networking with other professionals.

8 respondents (7.4%) indicated that their use of SNSs would likely decrease in the future, citing *"less time on my hands"* [QP99] and lack of interest. Only one

participant (0.9%) claimed a possible increase, stating *“it’s going to become even more important”* [QP39].

A few respondents (3.7%) reported uncertainty regarding continuing use of SNSs, but noted it may be indispensable.

*I'd like to use Facebook less... but for so many people it's the only way, or at least an easier way of getting in touch with people*[QP38].

13 respondents (12.0%) predicted that they would be more cautious with what they make available online. Even users planning to continue using SNSs as they do now noted the necessity of caution when posting content, particularly to avoid jeopardising their professional endeavours. Employer surveillance will possibly affect SNS use amongst all respondents. Respondents indicate that they are willing to take measures to ensure that online content does not negatively affect their professional lives.

*Carry on the same, until I get a serious job, and then I'll recreate a new one, with appropriate pictures and stricter privacy settings* [QP98].



## 4.3. Interviews

### 4.3.1. Demographic profile

Interviews were conducted with nine postgraduate students (7 females, 2 males; aged 22-32). Interviewees consisted of four UK residents and five international students, and were studying in different departments within Aberystwyth University (Biological, Environmental & Rural Sciences; Information Studies; International Politics; and Computer Science).

### 4.3.2. SNS use

Interviewees used Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace, with Facebook being the most popular, and in all but one case, the most frequently used. Four participants used Twitter (one using it most frequently), and three used LinkedIn. Two participants had formerly used MySpace; however, they no longer used this site. Most interviewees were long-time SNS users (2.5-8 years); only one had begun within the last year. Additionally, most were frequent users (i.e. using SNSs everyday), except for two who visited SNSs once/twice per week.

Interviewees attributed specific purposes for different SNSs. Facebook was predominantly used for social interactions. Friends were a significant influence in deciding to join Facebook.

*It was something that other people had started using, and they had added me or linked me on it, so I joined it and got all my friends in on it [IP5]*

Professional/educational use of Facebook was uncommon, though two interviewees used Facebook to share and gather information relating to their profession.

Unlike Facebook, with its predominantly social focus, Twitter was not used for contacting friends. Instead, it was useful for discussing and keeping informed with news and professional topics, and also for professional networking and promotion.

*It's an easy way to show [employers] you are interested in issues to do with your future career, so it might just put you a little bit ahead [IP5].*

LinkedIn was also employed by interviewees to facilitate professional networking and to seek information regarding future careers.

#### **4.3.3. Information disclosure on SNSs**

Different information was posted on separate profiles, generally sharing day-to-day activities/pastimes on Facebook, while restricting LinkedIn and Twitter to academic/professional information. Although interviewees posted a wider variety of information on Facebook, they reported reluctance to share certain information, preferring to keep personal information (e.g. regarding family, relationships, etc.) amongst close friends.

*People who are in my actual circle will know that about me, but stuff I consider too personal to share online, I don't post[IP4].*

Interviewees were also reluctant to share detailed identifying information, and in particular, information about their location or contact details for fear of stalking, identity theft, or harassment. Some interviewees reported a preference not to discuss work-related matters on Facebook.

Several interviewees no longer posted information on their walls for all friends to see, instead using SNSs to communicate directly with friends.

*I don't update my status on Facebook anymore. It's more to get in touch with friends [IP3]*

Interviewees consciously restricted information disclosure, and reported that they were cautious in online interactions, citing the potentially large audience and permanency of this content. Several interviewees tried not to post too much information about their lives.

*I don't want everyone to know what I'm doing everyday... it can be a bit intrusive in that way [IP2]*

However, the trend of posting considerable information was noted, and some noted the influence of the SNS itself in this. Users may be influenced to disclose information due to the website's culture of sharing.

*Before, it would just ask you a bunch of your general likes... But now they have them separated into different fields so it encourages you to expand on it [IP1].*

Feedback regarding the extent to which one can learn about people from their profiles was mixed. Much can be learnt in some cases, “*because some people are inclined to post everything on Facebook*” [IP6]. However, people are selective with their disclosures; therefore it is difficult to determine what they are really like.

*I don't think you get to know everything about someone... they choose what they put up there... You can make yourself sound a certain way [IP5].*

Posted information is selected to portray the user in a certain manner, something which may be largely influenced by their perceived audience.

*People judge you when you post something, so you tend to think first 'should I post this, is this appropriate?' [IP3]*

#### **4.3.4. Privacy on SNSs**

In general, interviewees were aware of privacy issues, and employed stringent privacy measures to protect themselves on Facebook. However, they were happy for Twitter and LinkedIn profiles to be open to promote themselves professionally.

*I use it for career stuff, so I like people being able to find you randomly and think 'oh, that's the person we should employ' [IP5].*

Privacy was very important on Facebook, and interviewees, even those who relied heavily on the site, revealed that they would change their use of, or delete, their profile altogether if privacy settings were no longer available.

*It would kill me, but I think I would have to really revisit how I use Facebook... I would probably have to take a lot of stuff down [IP5].*

With Facebook, privacy was protected by limiting information disclosure, and restricting access to information. Interviewees generally only allowed Friends to access information. Some interviewees were careful in accepting Friend requests, with one deleting and reporting strangers who sent her Friend requests. Another regularly reviewed her Friends' list.

*I look at the person, and ask myself "do I really care about this person" and if no, I unfriend them [IP5].*

Some interviewees employed additional measures to protect their information. One prevented strangers from finding her profile by removing it from Facebook's search results. Another employed Facebook's new privacy feature separating Friends into groups based on intimacy/familiarity, and allowed only close friends to access all information.

*People I don't really know, I've only met them at parties and stuff, I have them as "acquaintances" so they're on a limited profile [IP7].*

Although some interviewees believed that properly-used privacy settings should ensure the safety of posted information, others expressed doubt over this, stating "*I don't think there is anywhere online that you can post information, and it'd be safe*" [IP1]. Even with privacy settings, interviewees highlighted the importance of only sharing information appropriate for wide audiences, as there were no guarantees over who could access profile information.

*If you wouldn't be happy with someone reading your comment in a magazine, don't put it on social networking sites, because it's the same difference at the end of the day [IP5].*

Many interviewees reported that they weren't entirely confident in maintaining privacy, blaming human error and system flaws. Some reported that Facebook changed too often and did little to inform users as how best to protect themselves.

*It's difficult when the websites change... it takes you a while to get around the grasp of it [IP2]*

*It's too complicated and I think that's on purpose... so people get a bit confused and it's better for Facebook because they can control better what they want to do with the information [IP7].*

Two interviewees were confident in protecting themselves online. For one, it was due to restricting information disclosure instead of relying on privacy settings. For the other, it was due to extensive experience using these sites. However, she had witnessed less experienced users struggling with privacy settings. The least experienced interviewee reported that she had difficulty with this and only through experimenting with the site was she beginning to understand Facebook privacy. Another interviewee reported that she had had to help other users in setting up their profiles and explain how they could protect themselves.

*They would always come to me and ask me stuff; they were too scared and worried to put anything on there in case it all got out [IP5].*

Many interviewees reported seeking information from friends and/or media reports regarding privacy issues. Several interviewees reported that SNSs failed to inform users, and that users themselves had to actively seek information and keep updated.

*You do have to keep aware of what's happening. If they have any changes of rules or if you need to update your privacy settings, you just have to keep on top of things [IP5].*

Although several interviewees reported that they wished SNSs would better inform users, one interviewee noted that the SNS's role in this is somewhat limited.

*If Facebook was to release information, would you actually pay attention to it? How many people read the terms and conditions? [IP1].*

#### 4.3.5. Employer surveillance

Most interviewees were aware of employers checking SNS profiles; however, one was unsure whether this occurred in her home country (Trinidad), indicating possible cultural differences with this practise.

Some interviewees understood why employers used these sites, and also noted the opportunity for job applicants to take advantage of this trend,

*You can use things like Twitter to show that you're interested in the area you're trying to get a job in, so you're not just going to be someone who turns up at work, that you might have something extra that you can give to the job[IP5].*

Interviewees were happy with sites such as LinkedIn and Twitter being checked, and some were accepting of Facebook checks as they had privacy settings and appropriate information in place. However, others were more reluctant regarding this, arguing that employers should instead focus on academic/career information. Interviewees were keen to maintain a separation between their work-life and their personal life.

*I'm one person outside of work, one person in work, and I will be professional and do my job when I'm there, but my downtime is my own [IP5].*

This separation extended to their online activities, with interviewees creating separate SNS profiles to maintain “*several online identities*” [IP1]. This separation went as far as interviewees wishing to block managers and co-workers from personal profiles, unless they were also friends socially.

Interviewees argued that Facebook information provided only a limited view of their personality, and, as a result, may cause employers to make negative judgments regarding applicants who are otherwise suitable candidates.

*Seeing the person's social side doesn't really show what they're qualified for [IP8].*

*You can party a lot, but still be a serious person at work [IP7].*

Responses to the possibility of being asked to log into their profile during an interview were negative, even amongst respondents who were otherwise happy for employers to check their profile. Several interviewees reported that such a request would cause them to think negatively about the company, and even consider turning down the job.

*I would probably say 'no thank you' to the job offer [IP4]*

However, despite reporting discomfort, some interviewees indicated that they would comply with the request, feeling pressured when put on the spot.

*If it was in an interview, you'd feel you'd just have to do it. I wouldn't be happy about it, but I guess I'd do it [IP9].*

Interviewees questioned the accuracy of judgements based on Facebook information, and were concerned in case information was taken out of context. Facebook information demonstrated their social lifestyle to the exclusion of professional interests, and so, failed to inform employers about their educational/professional achievements.

*You can still have a very good social life and still be very hardworking [IP2].*

*People take pictures only at certain events; I don't think it captures your entire life [IP4].*

Several interviewees asked that employers looking at SNS information would be objective and recognise that information posted on socially-focused SNSs would not necessarily conform to professional standards, as it is not employed for this purpose.

*You can't just pretend you're an upstanding citizen hiding behind a really smart profile [IP1].*

This is a particularly pertinent issue for students who often post content about their university experiences- information which may differ significantly from what employers wish to see.

#### 4.3.6. Evolving use of SNSs

Most interviewees wished to continue using SNSs as they do now. However, this depended on changes in SNSs and in their lives. Interviewees reported that employer surveillance would cause them to become more cautious, possibly removing content from their profiles or creating professional ones. Those who reported that their profile would remain unchanged were already confident that their information was appropriate, or were relying on privacy settings for protection.

While interviewees reported that they would continue to use LinkedIn and Twitter for professional reasons in the future, professional use of Facebook seemed unlikely, with interviewees stating they would be uncomfortable connecting with employers on what they deemed a personal site.

*I don't think it's right to have employers mixed with friends [IP2].*

The rise in SNS checks and its subsequent effect on how users employ Facebook could negatively affect the site itself.

*You'd have to be careful, so why bother? The point of Facebook is to have fun with your friends... If you can do that anymore, there is no point [IP7].*

However, others disagreed, stating that although professional use may become more common, using Facebook socially was likely to continue. One interviewee noted that the development of new features aimed at hiding information from unwanted viewers makes it safer for users to continue sharing information freely. Enabling users to target disclosures towards specific audiences is beneficial as “[it will] give you the freedom to say what you want more” [IP8], and help enhance communication between users while protecting their privacy.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated the importance of SNSs for university students. Facebook, the most popular SNS, was primarily used for social



interactions, with interviewees explaining that professional networking was restricted to specific sites (i.e. LinkedIn and Twitter).

Both questionnaire respondents and interviewees restricted accessibility of online information, and avoided sharing certain personal information in order to protect their privacy. They were also aware of employer surveillance, and therefore, were reluctant to share information that may damage their future professional image. Many students were against SNS checks, reporting concern over their information being misinterpreted and harming their chances of gaining employment; however, a significant number of questionnaires reported acceptance of SNS checks, claiming that they were careful when sharing information, and highlighting possible benefits. As noted by interviewees, Facebook information was generally restricted to Friends, while professional information on other sites was shared more widely.

Privacy was important amongst both undergraduates and postgraduates, and similar concerns as in earlier research were reported. There were no significant differences between undergraduate and postgraduate respondents regarding confidence in protecting information; however, interviewees expressed more doubts on this matter, particularly noting the difficulties caused by changes in the SNSs themselves.

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students wished to maintain a separation between their social/personal life and professional life, including their online activities. Interviewees used certain SNSs for professional purposes, but wished to keep Facebook for interacting with friends. The majority of participants wished to continue their current use of SNS; however, employer surveillance was found to have a possible impact on SNS use, with both groups reporting that their future use of these sites may change in response to this threat.

The next chapter will further analyse these results, and discuss them in relation to the existing literature.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Results from the online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were relatively consistent with earlier research, yet additional interesting facts emerged during analysis, particularly with regard to the separation of personal and professional lives (online and offline), the active role played in restricting information disclosures, and the potential impact of employer surveillance. This chapter will analyse the results gathered through investigation of the research question, and will discuss the current findings within the context of existing research.

### **5.2 Use of SNSs amongst students**

SNS use was prevalent amongst the current sample, and most participants were active SNS users. These findings were consistent with research such as DeGagne and Wolk (2006), Pempek et al (2009) and Madhusudhan (2012), which discussed the considerable integration of SNSs into users' lives. The particular popularity of Facebook reflected earlier findings (e.g. Madhusudhan, 2012; Jabr, 2011; Hsu and Yang, 2011), supporting the importance of this website amongst contemporary internet users.

The predominant use of SNSs amongst current participants was to maintain pre-established social relationships, confirming findings from Lenhart and Madden (2007), Ellison et al (2007), and Pempek et al (2009), and lending credence to Subrahmanyama et al's (2008) supposition that SNS users mainly use SNSs to solidify their offline identity, as opposed to constructing new identities. In general, posting information for widespread observation is not the most important part of SNSs; many interviewees reported preferring to directly address friends, and significantly more respondents used SNSs to keep up with friends' lives instead of posting personal content, consistent with Pempek et al (2009), which found that participants spent a significant portion of time browsing information without actively interacting.

Future SNS use is likely to remain important. Although limited time and waning interest may affect future use, it was noted that SNSs were an important means of contacting friends, and so, would possibly become a necessary form of communication. The influence of friends in decisions to create and maintain SNS profiles was noted by other users, and was consistent with Park (2010) who noted the influence of peer behaviour on the popularity of new technologies. The establishment of SNSs (particularly Facebook) as the easiest way to connect with others will influence decisions to maintain personal profiles, and, resulting from this, will draw users to SNSs heavily populated by known friends/acquaintances.

### **5.3 Different online identities**

Donelan, Herman, Kear and Kirkup (2009) noted that SNSs are possibly “blurring the boundaries between the personal and professional” (p.94). However, if the behaviour of current participants is any indication, SNS users are taking active measures to separate different aspects of their online lives. They strive to maintain boundaries between their social and professional online interactions. Job applicants have multiple identities (Herriot, 2004), which, with the aid of SNSs, they are able to exhibit in whatever manner they want to their chosen audience. However, Smith and Kidder (2010) note that their online image may not be one which applicants wish to show employers. Participants of this research seem to be aware of this, and are taking measures in order to ensure that employers only see their professional personas.

What became apparent from discussion with interviewees was that while Facebook was used for interacting with friends, Twitter and LinkedIn were deliberately employed for professional purposes. Professional use of SNSs was not as widely established amongst questionnaire respondents, possibly due to the partiality towards Facebook use, a site highly focused on social interactions. Many questionnaire respondents were against SNS checks simply because they wanted to maintain a separation between their private and professional lives, both online and offline. Additionally, questionnaire respondents reported using SNSs to gather/share information related to professional interests; however, very few engaged in active professional networking. Interviewees elaborated on this, citing the availability of

personal information and their discomfort with allowing managers/co-workers with whom they had no social relationship to access such information.

Interviewees who employed more than one SNS reported dissatisfaction with employers checking their more personal/socially-orientated profiles, due, in part, to what they claimed to be a lack of relevant information. Questionnaire respondents appeared to refrain from posting professional information on SNSs, while some interviewees reported preferring not to discuss such matters on their personal profiles, thereby potentially limiting the usefulness of these sites in hiring decisions.

## **5.4 Information disclosure and privacy behaviours**

Questionnaire respondents generally demonstrated caution when sharing personal information, with most posted information restricted to friends, or, as in the case of highly personal/sensitive information, hidden from view or omitted altogether. Basic details were generally displayed more widely, as well as information over which users had less direct control. Interviewees demonstrated similar information-sharing behaviours, reporting that while they were comfortable sharing basic information, they were cautious sharing more detailed personal information, for fear of endangering their personal safety/well-being.

This differed from earlier research by Pempek et al (2009), which noted the tendency of SNS users to provide information access to large numbers of people. For current questionnaire respondents, posted content was usually restricted in some way. Outside of name and screen name, most information was usually reported as unavailable to the public, with at most 27.8% of respondents revealing particular details publicly. Nosko et al (2010) reported similar reticence amongst SNS users to share personal information widely and noted that users were selective when sharing information, and were actively making decisions regarding disclosures. Current respondents treated different information in different ways, suggesting that they are utilising more comprehensive privacy settings allowing them to specify the audience for each piece of information. Respondents were also generally aware of who could access different pieces of information, with low numbers reporting

unawareness over information visibility, suggesting that most of these users are, or believe they are, protecting their information.

Some interviewees chose to omit information from their profiles, as they wished to limit the spread of this information to family/close friends. As noted by Boyd (2006; cited in Walther et al, 2008), SNS connections can encompass anything from intimate relationships to casual acquaintance. This was reiterated by an interviewee who reported implementing additional privacy settings to limit the amount of information available to some accepted Friends- individuals she knew socially, but with whom she was unwilling to share private details. Earlier research e.g. Marsoof (2011) and Park (2010), noted the tendency for SNS users to allow access to information indiscriminately. This did not appear to be the case amongst current participants, with most respondents reporting that they allowed only known individuals to access their information, while some interviewees reported placing additional restrictions on accepted Friends.

Online privacy was considered important by participants; interviewees, in particular, reported that privacy maintenance was highly important on SNSs which contained personally-orientated information, and, therefore, privacy settings were a necessity. In contrast to earlier research by Christofides, Muise and Desmarais (2009), whose participants disclosed more information on Facebook than offline, current interviewees reported restricting their information-sharing online. However, the tendency for users to disclose lots of information was discussed, with interviewees noting that excessive information disclosure and careless privacy behaviours are promoted by the site. These responses echo Fernandez's (2009) assertion that SNSs "are controlled spaces whose owners have a vested interest in promoting certain activities" (p.5).

In keeping with the separate uses given to different SNS accounts, interviewees wished to separate the audience of their different profiles, restricting employers to their more professionally-orientated profiles while keeping their Facebook profiles amongst chosen friends. As a result, they kept Facebook profiles private, while leaving other profiles open to the public in order to extend the reach of professional information. Despite the opportunity for linking different SNS platform,

participants maintained a separation between SNS profiles, and, perhaps, as noted by interviewees, a separation between their professional and social identity.

Privacy concerns reported by participants were similar to those in the literature (e.g. Madhusudhan, 2012). What was of most concern was the possibility of access/distribution of personal information by unknown/unauthorised parties, and the potential resulting harm to their safety/well-being. The possibility of employer surveillance of SNSs was not widely reported amongst questionnaire respondents, with only 7.4% reporting this as a general concern, suggesting that, compared to other possible risks, it is not a particularly prevalent one.

Privacy settings were widely used; however, most questionnaire respondents and interviewees restricted information-sharing, indicating that they did not rely completely on the websites. They were aware that privacy settings were prone to failure, and instead preferred to rely on their own instincts to prevent leaks of personal/sensitive content. Different responses were given by questionnaire respondents and interviewees regarding perceived confidence in maintaining online privacy. While questionnaire respondents were, in general, at least somewhat confident in their ability to protect their information, interviewees voiced doubts. They noted that privacy settings were often overly complicated and subject to frequent change, so it was difficult for users to completely ensure that posted information was secure.

The information made available by SNSs regarding privacy does not appear to be widely used, with only around one-quarter of questionnaire respondents reporting to read privacy policies. Additionally, only two interviewees reported to read the privacy policy. When seeking information on SNSs and privacy, interviewees prefer turning to friends for advice, or seeking information from unrelated sources such as the media and research articles. Seeking advice from friends was particularly apparent amongst less experienced users, with one interviewee reporting that she was frequently approached by friends who were concerned over who could access their information. Although many interviewees complained about the lack of information provided by SNSs, one noted that the role played by these sites in informing users was small, as users choose to overlook the already available information.

## **5.5 Impact of SNS checks by employers**

Both questionnaire respondents and interviewees were aware of the possibility of SNS checks conducted by employers, providing mixed responses regarding its impact on future SNS use. For most respondents, employer surveillance was reported as likely to have an impact, with some indicating that their future use of SNSs would be more cautious as a result of this. Others reported being prepared to make changes to online activities in the event of SNS checks. Interviewees preferred checks of more professionally-focused profiles, but were satisfied with general checks of their Facebook profiles, as they believed that employers would be unable to access potentially damaging content.

However, interviewees reacted negatively to more invasive checks of Facebook profiles, reporting that this would likely impact their opinion of the company in question. These results were consistent with findings from Madera (2012), which found that organisations that employed SNS checks were perceived of as less fair, and job pursuit intentions for these organisations were lower. While current participants were, in general, accepting of the possibility of SNS checks, there are limits to what employers can do without incurring accusations of unfairness, and, as a result, damage their reputation amongst prospective employees. Employers may argue that an applicant can walk away from the company if they do not agree with their practises (Clark and Roberts, 2010). However, what became apparent was the pressure placed on applicants to allow such a practise, as turning down a position may not be a feasible option in a recession. Therefore, employers must be aware that their practise, although complied with, will have a negative effect on opinions of the company, and they may find that they will lose applicants in the future, becoming employers of last resort (Byrnside, 2008).

Like questionnaire respondents, interviewees also reported that employer checks of online profiles would cause them to be more cautious when using SNSs. They preferred to utilise SNSs such as LinkedIn and Twitter for professional purposes, but reported that they were prepared to make changes to their Facebook profiles, e.g. altering their current profiles or creating new ones in order to impress employers. Clark and Roberts (2010) identified this as one of the major problems

with employer surveillance of SNS profiles, that they will significantly affect future use of these sites, and weaken SNSs as a medium of communication. If the practise of SNS checks continues and gains prominence, users will be more inclined to self-censor, and may have misgivings regarding their information-sharing practises. For one interviewee it was noted that the need to become cautious when using SNSs could have a detrimental effect on her online experience and may stop her from using it, thus confirming Clark and Robert's (2010) prediction of employer surveillance damaging the benefits of SNS communication. However, others noted that social communication would remain prominent on SNSs; instead it may just transform slightly. Uses for different SNSs have already become established and are not likely to significantly change in the future, with a large proportion of the questionnaire respondents and interviewees reporting that their use of SNSs, though dependent on changes in SNSs and personal circumstances, would remain similar in the future. Although interviewees were prepared to use SNSs for professional networking, this would generally be restricted to particular sites, leaving Facebook for social interactions. Only a small number of questionnaire respondents planned to focus on professional networking in the future, highlighting the importance placed in maintaining social relationships on SNSs.

Both user behaviour and SNS interface are likely to evolve in the face of employer surveillance, as it is in the interests of both to adapt to this practise. As noted by one interviewee, Facebook is already introducing new features that would prove beneficial for individuals seeking to continue using SNSs for social interaction while facing the possibility of SNS checks.

## **5.6 Concerns with employer judgements of SNS information**

Although research such as Morgan et al (2010) and Strater and Lipford (2008) assert that SNS users post truthful information, interviewees noted that posted information, although generally accurate, is one-sided, and therefore, is not an accurate portrayal of the individual. Therefore, employers planning to engage in SNS checks may only be making judgements on an incomplete portrayal.



Madera (2012) recommends that employers planning to check SNSs as part of their hiring process should focus on job-related information. However, this may prove troublesome due to the unavailability of such information on certain profiles. While Twitter and LinkedIn contained information regarding interviewee's professional experience and interests, Facebook information was related to social interactions, information which did not include much reference to professional endeavours. As related in the literature review, employers have justified checking personal profiles to confirm information provided in applications, particularly education/employment history. However, as low numbers reported to reveal this information to the public, the usefulness of personal profiles for this purpose is questioned. Employers must take care when scanning SNS profiles for confirmatory information, as this information may not be accessible.

Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (2008) questioned the accuracy of online information, noting that posters have control over information, and, therefore, are able to select how to convey themselves to viewers, enhancing their preferred self-image. Self-presentation in SNS profiles was commented on by interviewees, who noted that *"you can make yourself sound a certain way"* [IP5]. Acquisti and Gross (2006) note that SNSs users can employ personal profiles as a means of representing their public persona, something which may vary considerably depending on their perceived audience. Interviewees reported that they took their audience into consideration to avoid negative judgements, consistent with findings from Valkenburg et al (2006; cited in Pempek et al, 2009) which noted that SNS users posted information aimed at deriving positive feedback from their audience. Pempek et al (2009) noted that "people present themselves as how they want others to perceive them" (p.234), and, in the case of college students, this may express itself in the inclusion of material referring to alcohol, drugs or risky sexual behaviour, all which may be considered as part of college life, or information of an exaggerated/offensive nature intended to entertain or impress viewers (Peluchette et al, 2010). The availability of such information was noted by interviewees, and they requested that employers look at such information objectively, and realise that such behaviour is often a part of university life and will not indicate how the individual behaves in a professional environment. The possibility of innocent information being

misinterpreted by employers was also noted, and was a significant concern amongst both questionnaire respondents and interviewees.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Findings from this study are consistent with earlier research, particularly regarding the popularity of social use of SNSs, principally with Facebook. Interviewees reported that they confined specific uses to different sites, thereby maintaining an online separation between their personal and professional lives. Participants reported a certain level of caution when using SNSs. Maintaining privacy is highly important for SNS users, and participants used privacy settings available on these sites. However, participants also demonstrated awareness that the interests of the site and the user do not always correspond; therefore an active role must be played in restricting information shared online. Protecting posted information from employers, though not a major privacy concern, may still play a potentially significant role in how these sites are used. However, although employer checks will have possibly have an impact on future SNS use, findings indicate that the outcome will not be as dire as predicted in Clark and Roberts (2010).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In response to earlier research predicting significant changes in SNS use as a result of privacy concerns, and in particular, the increasingly common practise of employer surveillance, this study set out to investigate the potential impact of SNS checks on use of these sites, and to explore possible SNS use in the future. The aim of this study was to explore current use of SNSs amongst a university population, with particular respect to the information-sharing and privacy behaviours exhibited, and to investigate the potential effect of employer surveillance on future employment of SNSs. The following overview examines the extent to which the objectives of this study were met, and concludes with some recommendations.

### **6.2 Research objectives**

In order to assess changing use of SNSs in response to privacy concerns, and, in particular, the practise of employers checking SNS profiles in order to screen candidates, a number of objectives were established and addressed. The researcher examined the factors affecting SNS use and information disclosure on these sites, using the reviewed literature as a basis for her investigation. A number of key areas were examined: use of SNSs; information-sharing behaviours; privacy concerns and behaviours; awareness of, and reactions to employer surveillance; and potential impact of employer surveillance on future SNS use.

### **6.3 Review of the research**

A mixed-methods approach was used for this study, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches through the use of an online questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews. The mixed-methods approach was chosen in order to ensure triangulation of results, and to investigate the topic more comprehensively than that which could be done using a single approach. The online questionnaire was carried out in order to attain a broad overview of how students are sharing and protecting information on SNSs, and gather preliminary data regarding

attitudes towards the possibility of employer surveillance of SNSs, while interviews were employed to investigate students' attitudes in greater detail and expand on issues raised in questionnaires.

Prior to data collection, the researcher undertook an extensive review of existing research to gain an understanding of the topic under consideration. Findings from existing research provided guidelines for investigation and provided a context in which to analyse current results. Current results were consistent with earlier research demonstrating the influence of SNSs the importance of information-sharing on these sites. However, SNS users face problems in protecting their information due to fallible privacy settings, human error, and a lack of clarity regarding a legal right to privacy on SNSs. Current participant were aware of these issues, with many reporting that they relied on their own judgement when sharing information, as opposed to depending on the SNS to protect their content.

The availability of personal information has attracted employers to these sites, who are beginning to review SNS profiles as part of their hiring procedures. Participants were in general aware of this possibility, and were not dissatisfied as long as they were able to maintain some control over access to information. An important issue raised was the potential impact of employer checks of SNS profiles, with earlier research proposing that continuation of this practise may damage the utility of SNSs as a medium of communication. This premise was a significant driver of this study. While SNS checks will likely impact communication, it is not to the extent predicted in earlier research, as users and SNSs themselves will likely find ways to adapt to this practise.

The results from this study provide an in-depth insight into how students are currently sharing and protecting information on SNSs. Findings illustrate how and why these sites are used by this sample of university students, as well as demonstrating the extent of their information-sharing practises, and highlighting the active role they play in maintaining their online privacy. These findings also highlighted the awareness amongst the sample as to the prevalence of SNS checks, and, through employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study was able to gain a comprehensive insight into how participants viewed this practise, and its result effects on their online interactions.

## **6.4 Limitations of the research**

A number of challenges were faced in conducting this research, some which may have bearing on the validity of acquired results.

Firstly, challenges were faced in reaching an appropriately large sample. Although over one hundred students partook in the online questionnaire, this is still a small proportion of the entire student population. Additionally, utilising a snowball sampling method resulted in a non-random sample, which limits the generalizability of results and prevented the researcher from conducting certain statistical tests. Findings could only give indications of trends in behaviour, being unable to conclusively confirm or reject hypotheses. What was also found was a bias towards Facebook users. Although this may indicate that Facebook is the most widely utilised SNS, these findings may have been skewed due to the heavy use of Facebook in recruiting potential participants.

Previous research e.g. Morgan et al (2010) and Nosko et al (2010) examined the actual content of SNS profiles as part of their research. Time and possible ethical constraints prevented this researcher from examining actual SNS content, instead of relying on accounts from users. Self-reports may be subject to inaccuracies due to social desirability biases and mistakes on the part of the participant, therefore, the researcher cannot be certain that information-sharing and privacy behaviours were accurately described.

Finally, while this study attempted to measure attitudes amongst SNS users towards employer checks of personal profiles, no guarantees can be made as to the veracity of their feedback. Reported attitudes do not always correspond to predicted changes in behaviour (e.g. Acquisti and Gross, 2006), therefore, findings from this study that indicate that employer surveillance will perhaps have an impact on SNS use in the future cannot be positively verified from this research.

## 6.5 Recommendations

After conducting a review of existing research and taking into account the findings of this current study, a series of recommendations have been developed for SNS users, employers engaging in SNS checks, and the websites themselves.

- *Recommendations for users:* What was most apparent through reviewing the literature and questionnaire/interview responses was the need for SNS users to be careful with what they post. Current participants advised caution when making information available online, and asserted that it was the responsibility of the user to ensure the safety of their content. Additionally, for users on the brink of entering the job market, it is worth taking into consideration the possibility of creating alternative profiles to showcase professional experience and interests, while maintaining old profiles for socialising.
- *Recommendations for employers:* Employers should be aware of the fallibility of online information, and should refrain from taking SNS content at face value. Information posted online may be incorrect, outdated, posted without knowledge/consent, or may not refer to the correct individual. Reliance on SNS information in screening applicants should be avoided due to inaccuracies and possible misinterpretations of information. Available information may not be relevant for employment decisions, while relevant information may be omitted/hidden from view. Employers must avoid allowing personal biases to sway their judgements. Policies and training should be established to ensure standardisation of this practise, and employers should avoid overly invasive SNS checks. Employers should also consider being more open regarding hiring procedures, e.g. giving applicants prior knowledge of SNS checks. This may increase perceptions of fairness, and allow applicants to ensure professional information is available on their profiles.
- *Recommendations for SNSs:* It is important for SNSs to continue developing website features that will help users control the information they post, e.g. the development of Friend groups on Facebook and circles on Google+. The sites should also continue to educate users regarding available setting, and ensure that policies/guidelines are not overly complicated as there is a tendency for users to skip reading these documents. It would be more appropriate for sites to ensure that the default settings are higher in order to protect inexperienced

users who may not be aware of the measures they must take to protect themselves.

## **6.6 Future research**

Future research would do well to investigate a number of avenues that the researcher was unable to cover in this study.

This study was primarily an exploratory study, and, due to the relatively small and non-random sample, cannot be generalised to larger populations. Future research should consider gathering larger and random samples from university populations. This will also allow for more advanced statistical testing, thereby allowing to test for significant differences between groups.

A response from one international interviewee indicated possible cultural differences in this practise. While SNS checks may be expected in the US and Great Britain, they may be less common, and possibly less acceptable, in other countries. This could make for interesting comparisons internationally.

What has been noted in earlier research is that attitudes do not always lead to expected changes in behaviour. Carrying out a longitudinal study will provide more information as to how information-sharing and privacy behaviours are changing over time, and will allow researcher to investigate more thoroughly the impact of employer surveillance.

What should also be investigated is more wide-scale analysis into how different SNSs are treated. While responses from interviewees indicated that online behaviour varied from one site to the next, due to constraints in the online questionnaire, the researcher was unable to address this amongst larger audiences.

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The researcher followed guidelines as set out by the sixth edition of the American Psychological Association method of referencing

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## **Appendix 1: Letter accompanying Questionnaire Consent Form**

Information for students:

I am currently undertaking a dissertation as required for completion of my MSc Information and Library Studies course in Aberystwyth University. As part of my research, I am carrying out an online questionnaire looking at attitudes amongst students within Aberystwyth University towards sharing and protecting personal information while using social networking sites. The questionnaire consists of multiple-choice and short answer questions, and is preceded by a consent form outlining the nature of this research and how the information will be used. I would greatly appreciate your time and effort in completing the questionnaire, as it will greatly inform my research. Also, if you are able to pass it on to other students who may be interested in taking part, it would be very much appreciated.

The questionnaire can be found here:

[https://qtrial.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_9zVyZTpwhATunid](https://qtrial.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9zVyZTpwhATunid)

Thank you very much for your time,

Kindest regards,

Deirdre McGuinness

## **Appendix 2: Questionnaire Consent Form**

### ***Introduction***

This study attempts to collect information about how students are making use of social networking sites, with regards to the ways in which they share and protect personal information online. This study is conducted within Aberystwyth University only.

### ***Procedure***

For the purposes of this study, you are asked to complete a short questionnaire about your use of social networking sites, with respect to how you share information online, your methods of protecting your personal information, and how your use of social networking sites is changing, or may change in the future. The questionnaire consists of 18 questions and will take approximately 15 minutes or less. Questions are designed to determine your opinions regarding information-sharing, online privacy and employer surveillance of social networking sites. Please answer as truthfully as possible. This questionnaire will be conducted with an online Qualtrics-created survey.

### ***Risks***

Risks are minimal for involvement in this study. You will be accessing this survey via an anonymous link, therefore your personal information will not be tracked. You will not be asked to reveal any personal demographic information except for your age, gender, and year of study within Aberystwyth University.

### ***Confidentiality***

All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential and will only be reported in an aggregate format (by reporting only combined results and never reporting individual ones). All questionnaires will be concealed, and no one other than the primary investigator will have access to your information. The data collected will be stored in the HIPPA-compliant, Qualtrics-secure database until it has been deleted by the primary researcher.

### ***Your Information***

The data collected from this survey will be used for the researcher's dissertation as required for completion of the MSc Information and Library Studies course in Aberystwyth University. Upon completion, the dissertation (including analysed data) will be made available to the University examination board. In the future, there is a possibility that this research may be published on Aberystwyth University's online repository (CADAIR) and/or in academic research journals. Participants will not be identified at any stage of data collection or publication.

### ***Participation***

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely.

### ***Questions about the Research***

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Deirdre McGuinness at dmm12@aber.ac.uk.

I have read and understood the above consent form and desire of my own free will to participate in this study (You may wish to print a copy of this form for your own records, however, this is not a prerequisite for proceeding).

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

## **Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form**

This research looks at social networking site use and attitudes towards online privacy, the disclosure of personal information, and employer surveillance amongst students in Aberystwyth University.

As part of this, interviews will be carried out in order to better understand students' opinions regarding the above topics.

You will be taking part in an interview that will ask your opinion regarding:

- how you use social networking sites and share information online
- how you protect personal information
- online privacy
- employer surveillance of social networking sites
- social networking sites as a tool for professional networking

The information you provide for this interview will be used for the researcher's dissertation as required for completion of the MScEcon Information and Library Studies course in Aberystwyth University. Upon completion, the dissertation will be made available to the University examination board. In the future, there is a possibility that this research may be published on Aberystwyth University's online repository (CADAIR) and/or in academic research journals.

### ***Confidentiality***

Your personal information will remain confidential throughout this study. Interviewees are assigned numbers, and will not be referred to by name at any point throughout the study. Your interview will be recorded on the researcher's personal device and will later be transcribed for analysis. Your answers will be referred to in the published dissertation. This may include direct quotes from your transcript. The recording will be stored under your participant ID number and will be kept in a secure location accessible only by the researcher until it is deleted upon final completion of the dissertation.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to take part in this study. The researcher has explained the nature of the study and my part in it, and I have been informed how my information will be used and stored for the duration of the research. I am aware that all personal information pertaining to me will be kept confidential and that I will not be identified at any time throughout the study. I am aware that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, in which case my information will not be used.

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Interviewee demographic form

Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Area/subject of study: \_\_\_\_\_

Year of study: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been using social networking sites? \_\_\_\_\_

How often do you use social networking sites? \_\_\_\_\_

What social networking sites do you use? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

If more than one, which site do you use the most? \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 5: Online Questionnaire Template**

**1) Age**

**2) Gender**

- Male
- Female

**3) Are you a postgraduate or undergraduate student?**

- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate

**4) How many years of your course have you completed? (Please indicate if you are referring to undergraduate or postgraduate course)**

**5) What social networking site(s) do you use? (If you use more than one, list all the sites you use, but please indicate which website you use the most)**

**6) How often do you use/visit social networking sites?**

- Less than once a week
- Once a week
- A couple of times a week (2-3 days)
- Most days during the week (4-6 days)
- Once a day
- More than once a day
- Many times throughout the day

**7) Do you consider social networking sites to be a significant part of your day-to-day life?**

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

**8) For what do you use social networking sites? (Choose as many as may apply)**

- To keep in touch with people you do not see regularly
- To contact people you see on a regular basis
- To keep up to date with what is happening in your friends' lives
- To keep friends updated with what is happening in your life
- To meet new people
- To promote yourself
- To keep up-to-date with news and events in the wider world
- To keep up-to-date with information about famous/well-known people in whom you have an interest
- To develop and maintain professional contacts
- To look for and share information related to university coursework or work-related tasks
- To keep up-to-date with news and events occurring within your institution/network (i.e. within your school, university, place of work)
- Other (please specify)

**9) What information have you posted on your profile, and to whom is it made available?**

	General public	Friends and their friends only	Friends only	Myself only	Not certain who is able to view it	Not available/unsure if available
Screen name (e.g. a pseudonym or nickname)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Full name	-	-	-	-	-	-
Date of Birth	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hometown	-	-	-	-	-	-
Current address	-	-	-	-	-	-
Education history	-	-	-	-	-	-
Employment history	-	-	-	-	-	-
Family information	-	-	-	-	-	-
Friends list	-	-	-	-	-	-
Relationship status	-	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-	-



	General public	Friends and their friends only	Friends only	Myself only	Not certain who is able to view it	Not available/unsure if available
Sexual orientation						
Political views	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious views	-	-	-	-	-	-
Email address	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contact number	-	-	-	-	-	-
Personal website	-	-	-	-	-	-
Full address	-	-	-	-	-	-
Interests (e.g. "arts and entertainment", "sports", "activities", etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Posted photographs	-	-	-	-	-	-
Photographs in which you are tagged	-	-	-	-	-	-
Posted videos	-	-	-	-	-	-
Videos in which you are tagged	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wall posts on own wall	-	-	-	-	-	-
Notes/Blogs	-	-	-	-	-	-
Events you have created	-	-	-	-	-	-
Events you are attending	-	-	-	-	-	-
Communities/ Networks/Groups	-	-	-	-	-	-

**10)How important is online privacy to you?**

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Neither important nor unimportant
- Somewhat unimportant
- Not at all important

**11)When using social networking sites, what are your greatest concerns with regards to online privacy?**

**12)How confident are you in your ability to protect your privacy online?**

- Very confident
- Somewhat confident
- Undecided
- Not very confident
- Not at all confident

**13)How do you control the spread of your personal information when using social networking sites? (Choose as many as may apply)**

- Using strict privacy settings
- Blocking content from members of the public (i.e. people you are not friends with)
- Limiting the amount of information you upload to your profile
- Only uploading information you deem appropriate for a wide audience
- Limiting the amount and availability of important personal information (e.g. contact details, descriptive information such as date of birth, address, employment, etc.)
- Using a pseudonym or nickname instead of your full name to make it more difficult for members of the public to find your profile.
- Using private messaging to communicate information you do not want to make available to a wider audience
- Controlling what content you are tagged in (e.g. requiring website to ask for confirmation before you are tagged in a photograph)
- Keeping your password secret
- Reading the privacy policy for information on how your information is used
- Keeping your accounts across different social networking sites separate (i.e. not linked)
- Only accepting friend/follower requests from people you already know
- Other (please specify)

**14)Do you think it likely that employers might check your personal profile when you look for a job?**

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Maybe
- Probably not
- Definitely not
- Unsure

**15)How do you feel about the possibility of employers checking your online profile for information?**

**16)Would the possibility of employers checking your personal profile change how you share information online?**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**17)How do you think you will use social networking sites in the future?**

**18)Any additional comments?**

**Thank you for your time and co-operation in completing this questionnaire. If you have any queries relating to this study, you can contact the primary researcher at dmm12@aber.ac.uk.**

## Appendix 6: Interview Questions Template

*(Italicized information used as prompt in event of question needing explanation)*

### **Section 1: Social networking site use**

- 1) What motivated you to join your chosen social networking site(s)?
- 2) Why/How do you currently use your chosen social networking site(s)?
  - *Do you use different sites for different reasons?*
  - *Is your use of social networking sites mainly for personal/social purposes or do you use any for educational/professional reasons?*
- 3) What are the good and bad points of using your chosen social networking site(s)?
- 4) Do you think social networking sites are a useful way of learning about other people, and of expressing yourself?

### **Section 2: Information on social networking sites**

- 1) What kind of information do you post on your profile?
  - *Do you enjoy posting information?*
  - *Do you think, for you, it an important part of using social networking sites? Is it something you do a lot of?*
- 2) What information do you deliberately not post on social networking sites?
  - *Why?*
  - *Have you come across posted information (by other people) that you think is inappropriate to share?*
- 3) Do you feel that social networking sites encourage you to disclose in different ways (e.g. more information about yourself, different information) than you would do in person?
  - *Is there information you wouldn't reveal in real life that you do online?*
  - *Is there information you wouldn't reveal online that you do in real life?*
- 4) What are your major concerns with sharing information online?
  - *Do you worry about sharing too much information online?*
  - *Do you worry about strangers accessing your information?*
  - *Do you worry about people posting information relating you to without your consent/knowledge?*
  - *Do you worry about people using your information without your knowledge?*
  - *Do you worry about your personal information being permanently available?*

### **Section 3: Privacy attitudes and behaviour**

- 1) Currently, how private is your profile?
  - *Who can access your information?*
  - *Do you consider your chosen social networking site(s) a safe/trusted place in which to post personal information?*
  - *Do you trust your friends?*
- 2) How important is privacy when using social networking sites?
  - *How does the availability of privacy settings affect how you share information online? Does it make you share more?*
  - *If your profile was public (e.g. if you did have access to privacy settings), would it change what information you share?*
  - *Who would you be unhappy with having access to your online information?*
- 3) When using social networking sites, what are your major privacy concerns?
  - *How do you deal with these concerns?*
- 4) How do you protect your personal information when using social networking sites?
- 5) Do you feel confident regarding your ability to maintain your privacy online?
  - *How do you think you could improve on this?*
  - *How do social networking sites help you control the spread of your personal information?*
  - *What would you like to change?*
  - *Have you had any privacy problems in the past?*
- 6) Have you read the privacy policy? Have you altered your settings?

### **Section 4: Employers and social networking sites**

- 1) Do you think employers are likely to check social networking profiles of job applicants?
  - *Do you think this is fair?*
  - *Do you think it is right for information about your personal and social life to be taken into consideration when applying for a professional position?*
- 2) How would you feel if a company you were applying to checked your online profile (personal, non-career focused profile)?
  - *Would you think it was fair?*
  - *Would you be willing to allow them to check your profile?*
  - *Would this affect your judgement of the organisation as a whole?*
  - *Would it affect your intention to pursue a job with the organisation?*
- 3) How would you feel if you were asked to log into your account during an interview?
  - *Would you consider this fair?*
  - *Would you be willing to show them your profile?*

- 4) If an employer was to check your online profile, what would your greatest concerns be?
  - *Discrimination?*
  - *Information out of context etc.?*
- 5) What information do you think employers seek on social networking sites when making decisions regarding job applicants?
  - *Do they look for positive or negative information?*
  - *Do you think the information they find has an impact on their decision?*
  - *Do you think personal/social life information should be used when making hiring decisions?*
  - *Do you think employers can make accurate judgements about people by looking at their social networking site?*
  - *Do you think the information found on social networking sites could be useful/helpful for employers when making hiring decisions?*
- 6) What kind of information do you think employers would consider inappropriate or unprofessional?
  - *Is this information commonplace on social networking sites?*
  - *Why do you think this information is posted?*
  - *Do you worry about your online content been taken out of context and misunderstood by someone?*
- 7) Would you clean up your profile (i.e. censor the type of information you put up online) or create a new professional profile if you believed employers would find a way to access your profile?
  - *Why/Why not?*
  - *If yes, in what ways would you alter the profile?*
  - *How would you feel about becoming friends with co-workers or managers on social networking sites?*
- 8) If employer surveillance of social networking sites continues to become more common-place, do you think this will have an effect on how people in general, and you yourself, use social networking sites?
  - *In what way?*
  - *Would it change how likely you were to use social networking sites?*
  - *What is your feeling towards this?*

## **Section 5: Changing use of social networking sites**

- 1) How has your use of social networking sites changed since you first began using them?
  - *Is there a change in the type of information you share?*
  - *Do you use social networking sites for different reasons? (i.e. professional/educational)*
- 2) How has your attitude towards online privacy changed since you first began using them?
  - *Are you more aware of privacy issues with social networking sites?*

- *Are you more cautious with what information you upload?*
  - *Do you use privacy setting differently?*
- 3) How do you think your use of social networking sites or attitudes towards privacy will change in the future?
- *Do you think your use will be more professional based?*
  - *How would you like social networking sites to change in the future?*

## Appendix 7: Sample interview transcript (with highlighted themes)

### Sample from the interview carried out with interview participant IP1

Codes used in this section

- Employers' screening practises may be overly invasive
- Relevance of SNS information in decision-making
- Online information must be looked at objectively/tolerantly
- Maintaining control over information
- Information sought by employers
- Accuracy of online information

*Interviewer: Do you think employers check social networking sites of job applicants?*

Interviewee: Oh, they do. And it'd be silly of them not to use that really, but it depends, some of them may abuse that. There was a bit of a problem, I was reading this online, of employers demanding passwords at job interviews to see if you're the right candidate, and that's definitely abusing it. Fortunately, Facebook is trying to stamp down on that, trying to sue any employer that gets caught doing that. I personally wouldn't stand for it, if they tried that, I'd be like "hell no".

*Interviewer: Do you think it's right for information about your personal life to be taken into consideration when applying for a professional position?*

Interviewee: Well the interesting thing is, is that they managed to deal with it without having it before, so it's not like a mandatory thing that they necessarily need to know. But, on the other hand, if everyone's information is out there to some extent, as it is on Facebook, then the standards are going to change, the culture is going to change. They should, unless they're completely inhuman, get used to seeing pictures of people going out and getting drunk and having fun, as pictures on Facebook. The standards should change because it's not going to be an illusion, you



can't just pretend you're an upstanding citizen hiding behind a really, really smart profile, like you're an alien who's come down to earth as a perfect being.

*Interviewer: How would you feel if a company you applied to checked your personal profile?*

Interviewee: If they looked for me, they wouldn't be able to see any information I didn't want them to see, because of my privacy settings. I'm happy for them to look at what there is to see, very handsome profile picture of me, and some very basic information of me, like that I'm from the south of England and maybe my year of birth. That's not really personal information.

*Interviewer: If they asked you to log into your account, would it change your opinion of the company or affect your intention to pursue a job with them?*

Interviewee: It depends on whether it's an institutional thing or just a rogue member of staff who likes doing that sort of thing, who thinks it's necessary. It would depend on my overall feeling, if I did think it was institutional, I would report them, because that's just bang out of order.

*Interviewer: If an employer was to check your online profile, what would your greatest concerns be?*

Interviewee: Just things being taken out of context. I've got a few embarrassing pictures up there, and I don't mind them being up there. Like just as long as they have that in context, and they know that other people get involved in that sort of stuff, and that you're not perfect. Like there was that big furore about that letter from the mum to the daughter in law, and after that became viral, a load of pictures cropped up of her doing stuff at parties, there was some nudity involved, I don't know what level of nudity. They were all saying she was a bit of a hypocrite because she had taken that stand pretending to be so upstanding, when really she was just like everyone else, you're going to let your hair done every once in a while. Just take it in context. Standards should change

*Interviewer: What information do you think employers look for when making decision regarding job applicants?*

**Interview:** I think the kind of things they're looking for whether there are a lot of antagonisms, whether you're getting involved in a lot of online arguments with people. I think with timeline, you can see a lot more of that. Or just to see that you're not up to anything too inconsistent with their standards, like with pictures, if you have more contentious pictures rather than just embarrassing ones, if there's any involving illegal activities or harmful activities. Also to see if you're bad mouthing previous employers, because that needs to be taken into consideration, with certain jobs you will have access to sensitive information.

*Interviewer: Do you think they look for positive information that may help you get a job?*

**Interviewee:** I'd like to think they'd look to see if they'd look to see if you had a good sense of humour, or were well-read or enjoyed reading, or informative things. I'm less convinced by that, I think the majority is to see if you fit into the bad category.

*Interviewer: Do you think they can make accurate judgements from looking at a profile?*

**Interviewee:** You can't make a completely accurate, one-hundred-per-cent judgement about someone; because there are things they'll leave out, things that aren't there, things that misrepresent you, and stuff like that. It can capture some parts of you, but then what can normal interviews do, you have a ten-thirty minute interview for you to come across in a positive fashion. It's up to them to deal with the information they are provided with, to understand the context of it.